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PRETTY WITTY NELL

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MR. PEPYS (ballad-opera)	French
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Verse :

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NELL GWYN

Spencer Althorp Collection. Print in the British Museum

Frontispiece

PRETTY WITTY NELL

*An Account of Nell Gwyn
and her Environment*


By
CLIFFORD BAX



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UNLIKE Sir Gaga Thompson, I cannot thank my little grand-daughter for reading the proofs of this book because at present she does not exist. Nevertheless, there are several persons to whom I ought gratefully to make my acknowledgements. There are, for instance, Mr. Lovat Dickson who first thought, wisely or mistakenly, that Nell Gwyn and I would make a good match, Mr. Eric Gillett who influentially favoured the association, and Mr. John Bale, of Messrs. Chapman and Hall, who decided to give it his blessing.

Then there are Messrs. John and Edward Bumpus, or, if I am right in suspecting that they are as mythical as Romulus and Remus, let me say rather one of their courteous, helpful and experienced representatives, who gave me some assistance which must remain mysterious. If I say what it was, the shop at 350 Oxford Street will be so full of authors that the firm will have no chance of selling a book.

And there was my good friend, Mrs. Gabrielle Enthoven, who enabled me to find out that a certain letter, supposed to have been written by Nell Gwyn to Peg Hughes, was, after all, only an imaginary letter composed by one Tom Brown for a book which he published in 1702. And why should I omit my housekeeper, without whose cooking and consideration I might have written a more dyspeptic book? And then, too—how the list lengthens—there is Mr. Cammell who introduced me to a picture of Nell (p. 88) which has never previously been reproduced. And yet again, there is the delightful Mr. Arthur Irwin Dasent who, more than anyone else, matured and enriched my acquaintance with Nell

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Gwyn. If, as I hope, he is alive, I trust that he will not resent my continual and shameless picking of his pocket.

And last, but very surely not least, there are my friends Mr. V. E. Robson and Mr. Jack Piercy. Mr. Robson, busy though he is, checked my interpretation of Nell Gwyn's horoscope (the first, I fancy, which has ever been made), much as Mr. J. B. Hobbs might benevolently assist a schoolboy at the nets. As for Mr. Piercy, if the reader who skips this note should think me surprisingly knowledgeable about medicine, the explanation is that Mr. Piercy gallantly gave up an evening in order to instruct me about bubonic plague and to develop, in language fitted to my ignorance, his startling diagnosis of the sickness which proved fatal to poor Nell. Medicine, however, is a tricky subject: and if any doctor should find a medical mistake in this book, he is to attribute it to the blundering layman who wrote the pages.

C. B.

PORTRAITS OF NELL GWYN

THERE are many pictures which are supposed to represent Nell Gwyn. Indeed, all pretty young women of the period, and some that are far from pretty, seem to be labelled "Nell Gwyn" if the name of the sitter is not definitely known. In the Print Room of the British Museum I found perhaps fifteen alleged portraits. There is, for example, a quaint print of a sturdy nude woman with wings and a stupid face, but the stupidity is so pronounced that I reject it utterly. For the same reason I will have nothing to do with several of the others. They look like surly trollops.

Undoubtedly the sweetest, merriest, and most characteristic portrait is the one which is so well known because it is in the National Portrait Gallery. Imagine, then, how disconcerted I was when Mr. Charles Richard Cammell, the poet, who has given me permission to reproduce an unknown picture of Nell, assured me that the famous portrait is not Nell at all, but is probably an early picture of her detested rival Louise. I must admit that it bears a striking resemblance to a picture of Louise which appears in Cunningham's book about Nell: but it is so unlike the portrait of Louise in the National Gallery that, unless all our experts pronounce a contrary verdict, I shall continue to believe that it is Nell Gwyn looking her best. Perhaps, having seen the comparable picture of Louise, Nell decided to be painted in exactly the same attitude. That would at least be like her.

There is, for example, the story—which the reader will find on page 162—about Louise having had her portrait done, and she reclining in a chemise on a

bank, and of Nell promptly stealing her thunder. The result appears opposite page 162, and although the face might just as well be the face of anyone else, the picture is, I think, amusing if only for the little figure of Charles in the background and for the representation of Nell's two children as fat cherubs floating above her.

Mr. Cammell says that "the pictures in the Spencer Collection at Althorp are the best authenticated, and the Spencer Nell is the best authenticated of all the portraits of her. My picture undoubtedly represents the same woman and is, I believe, one of the very few genuine pictures of Nell extant."

I

THE DARLING OF DESTINY (1650-1687)

POSTHUMOUS fame has not for women the mysterious attraction which it has for a considerable number of men. Experts have told us that women are the more realistic sex; and certainly it would be difficult to find a woman who, for the sake of a renown which she will never enjoy, is willing to turn her back upon worldly prosperity. A powerful instinct impels women to squeeze pleasure out of the passing day; and I have thought for a long time that they concentrate, more than men do, upon the material and the immediate because they are more continuously in touch with the life-making impulse of Nature. If it were not so, any woman might envy the posthumous fame of Nell Gwyn; for to those who are born to speak English her name has more sunlight in it than the name of any other woman in history. No one can think of her without a kindling of kindliness; nor would it be too much to say that, although she has been dead for two hundred and fifty years, men still fall in love with her. That is the fate of exceedingly few women—perhaps of not more than five or six. Nell Gwyn, in fact, has been one of the darlings of Destiny.

She has won her position in the memory of the world by no obvious means. I never walk in the West End of London without rejoicing that so many of the girls and women whom I see are either beautiful or pretty, and that most or all of them will transmit their English beauty to the next generation. In the West End, and even more noticeably during the luncheon interval at the Eton and Harrow match, trim figures and pretty faces go by

in a sequence that has hardly a break in it: and I have not the least doubt that in London there has always been prettiness and to spare. Nell Gwyn's was one of these winsome English faces, and she had more than a period prettiness. Many of the "beauties" commemorated by Sir Peter Lely are not to our twentieth-century taste; but his picture of Nell, in the National Portrait Gallery, shows that she would have enchanted any cocktail party or diplomatic reception of our own time. We cannot say, though, that she was one of the world's most beautiful women. We could say this, in my judgment, of the *Princesse Mazarin*—one of her rivals at Whitehall; but Nell Gwyn was just vital, dainty and alluring. Nor, again, did she achieve anything of importance—unless the world is right in clinging to the tradition that it was she who inspired the foundation of Chelsea Hospital. She never put a finger into the political pie and, in consequence, had no effect upon history. In fact, she is surpassed at every point by somebody else: by Sappho, in æsthetic genius; by Aspasia, in political influence; by Helen and Phryne, we may suppose, in physical perfection; by Cleopatra, in magnificence; by Queen Elizabeth, in sagacity and force of character; by Florence Nightingale, in the good that she spread through the world; and even by Mrs. Mary Baker Eddy, in the matter of affecting the thoughts of men and women. Nell Gwyn, however, is unique because she has held the attention of posterity by force of personality alone. So clear is that personality that we know what it was like before we have read a single word about her.* If

* Ten years ago, for instance, I wrote a ballad-opera about "Mr. Pepys" and made Nell Gwyn the principal woman in it. At the time I knew nothing of her character: but now, having studied her life as closely as possible, I realise that the popular impression of Nell, upon which I rashly relied, is correct.

THE DARLING OF DESTINY

we knew as much of her as Boswell has enabled us to know of Dr. Johnson, we should possess, in that unwritten book, the very distillation of feminine charm which no one, except Tolstoy in *War and Peace* and Shakespeare in *As You Like It*, has ever had skill and sensibility enough to capture with words.

II

BIRTH (1650)

SHE was born on February the 2nd, 1650. We know the exact date because her horoscope still exists in the Bodleian Library, and because the astrologer who cast it, following the usual practice, inserted her birth-data in the centre of the map. The ingenious Dasent has put forward a guess that the man who drew up this horoscope was the famous astrologer William Lilly, who unequivocally foretold the Plague of 1665 and the Great Fire of London in 1666.* The guess was a good one, for the astrologer has drawn the sign of Mars in a peculiar manner which we find again in other horoscopes cast by Lilly.

At the end of this book I shall give an interpretation of the map. For the present it is of interest because it records the day and even the hour of birth, but not the place. Put into English, the birth-data would read:

Born at ———
Saturday, February 2nd
Six a.m.
1650

There can be little doubt that Nell Gwyn herself supplied the astrologer with this information—probably during one of her visits to Oxford: for

* After the Great Fire a Government Commission called him to one of its meetings in the hope that, having foretold the Fire, he would be able to say how it started. There was a typical rumour at the time that it had been started by some malicious Frenchmen.

BIRTH

anyone who practises the ancient science will very soon learn that the number of people who know the hour of their birth is not large. The birth of Nell Gwyn was an event that seemed to be of no more importance than the birth of a kitten in the house next door: indeed, an early chronicler states that she "was born in a cellar": and nothing could be more unlikely than that any person, outside the family, could have told Lilly that she was born at six in the morning. It is odd that she did not know the place of her birth, but this merely suggests that the horoscope was cast on the spur of the moment, and that Nell, not expecting to be asked where she was born, had to shake her head and admit that she had never enquired. This would not be at all unusual. The hour of birth interests children much more than the place. Many children, when celebrating their birthdays, will ask their mothers "When was I born? Was I born yet?" and it was, I surmise, from such a memory of childhood that Nell Gwyn was able to say that she had been born at six in the morning. So well does the horoscope fit her that the time given must be almost exact.

Even the tireless Dasent could not determine the place of her birth. Three cities claim her: Hereford, Oxford and London. Here indeed is matter for a battle royal among antiquarians, but the reader may feel, as I do, that the issue is of small importance. Granger, a very early authority, says that her birth at Hereford "is at least the tradition in the family of her noble descendants [the Dukes of St. Albans], one of whom, Lord James Beauclerk, was Bishop of Hereford in the reign of George the Third." Her father, who was a Welshman, may well have migrated to Hereford, and we know that he died, when Nell was an infant, at Oxford; but inasmuch as he also lived in London, it seems most likely that

she was born where first we set eyes on her—"in a small house in a squalid alley." The alley was called Coal Yard, and it lay at the top of Drury Lane where the Lane leads into Holborn. The Coal Yard itself was a vile slum, but the neighbourhood was fashionable. The Earl of Salisbury and Lord Howard had mansions in Drury Lane, and so had the Countess of Carlisle, Lady Paget, Lady Forster and Lady Diana Curzon: high and haughty personages who would have stared and gasped if they could have foreseen that their names would be mentioned because they were living not far from a slum-child round the corner.

Some old accounts inform us that Nell's father was a fruit-seller in Covent Garden Market; but, according to the indefatigable Dasent, there was no organised fruit-market at Covent Garden in 1650. On the other hand, a certain Frederick van Bossen, writing within a year of Nell's death, stated that her father was "Thomas Gwine, a captain of ane antient family in Wales." In 1650 thousands of men had lost everything because they had fought on the losing side, and Nell's elder sister affirmed that their father had been one of them. By 1650, therefore, he was probably a broken-down gentleman, and from all that we know of his wife (whose maiden name was Smith) we can assume that he had precipitated his fall by marrying beneath him. It is, consequently, far from impossible that, in desperation, he sold fruit in Covent Garden, even although there was no general market. We have seen the like of such a fate in our own time.

Her mother had the misfortune, so far as her reputation goes, to live until her younger daughter was twenty-nine years old and a woman famous not only throughout England but in the more civilised parts of Europe. Her first name, like her daughter's,

BIRTH

was Eleanor: her life, personality and death, as we shall see, were Hogarthian. By reason of Nell's romantic and triumphant success, old Mrs. Gwyn became a notorious person. She could never have dreamed that titled gentlemen would write about her, but they did: they wrote lampoons in which they immortalised her life-long marriage to the brandy-bottle.

This derelict family in a verminous back street belonged to the dregs of London; and when the ruined Captain was dead, his drink-sodden widow and their two little girls must often have had difficulty in finding enough food to keep body and soul together. We realise how deeply they had sunken in the social scale when we next catch a glimpse of Nell Gwyn, at the age of eleven or twelve, barefoot on the cobbles of Covent Garden and offering fish or turnips to the passers-by.

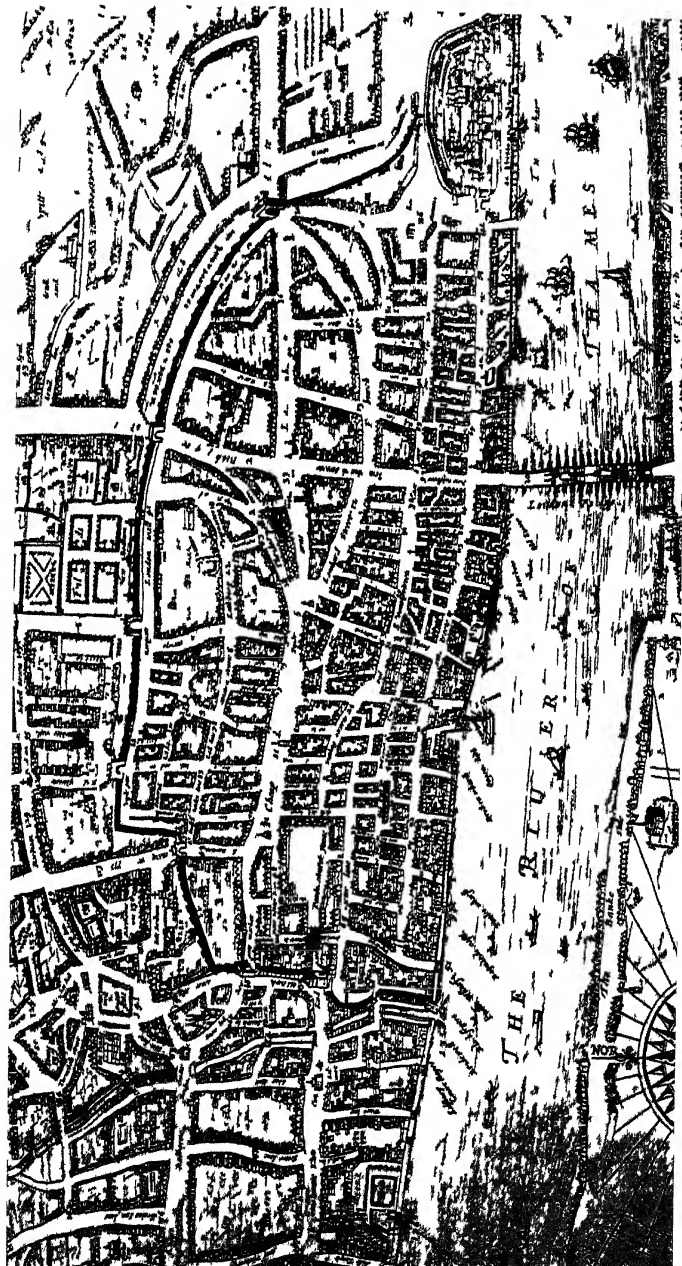
III

LONDON DURING THE COMMONWEALTH

IF we are to become intimate with Nell Gwyn's personality, we must form a clear impression of her period, and, above all, seeing that she was so thoroughly a Londoner, must realise what London was like when she knew it. How, then, shall I set about my task? Of necessity I shall repeat much that is more familiar than yesterday's newspaper to an expert in seventeenth-century knowledge. But how can I bring myself to ignore the wild prank of Sir Charles Sedley at the Cock Tavern in Bow Street, or Nell Gwyn's delightful remark when, at Oxford, the crowd mistook her for somebody else? And similarly, in writing about the growth of London, I shall do as I would be done by.

The Romans, no doubt, considered that they had built an imposing town. It had its defensive wall and its nine gates—Ludgate, Newgate, Aldersgate, Cripplegate, Bishopsgate, Aldgate, Posterngate, Billingsgate and Dowgate. To us their London would seem very small, for it covered only the area which we call "the City." Eleven hundred years later it had swollen far less than we should expect. Through Bishopsgate a long solitary tentacle had grown toward Shoreditch. Another, to the north-west, had connected the City with the Inns of Court and was called Holborn. To the south-west Fleet Street and the Strand made a long rural road toward Westminster. Across the river lay Southwark with its theatres and the Bankside with its bear-garden and its brothels.

Even at the time of Nell Gwyn's birth London,



MAP OF LONDON IN NELL GWYN'S TIME

Courtesy of the British Museum

LONDON DURING THE COMMONWEALTH

though it had spread considerably, was still, by our measure, a compassable and friendly place. Holborn and the Strand, however, were no longer just roads among the fields. A Shakesperean character says,

When I was last in Holborn,
I saw good strawberries in your garden there,

and it would have been easy for Nell also to have found strawberries in Holborn; but the fields on either side had been built over. Drury Lane and Covent Garden were enclosed within London, and a Londoner would not feel that he was beginning to touch the real country until he came to Oxford Street and Piccadilly. London, in fact, was agricultural. No one was surprised to see cows or sheep ambling along its narrow ways or to hear a haywain rumbling over the cobbles. Knightsbridge, Wandsworth, Islington and Paddington were outlying hamlets, not less remote to a horseman of that time than Hertford is to the motorist of to-day. And so thinly built were the outer parts of London itself that if Nell had stood in the place which we now call Leicester Square she would have been able to see Temple Bar. Piccadilly, one or two generations earlier, had been termed by cartographers merely "the way to Reading"; and George Wither's lines would not have seemed at all quaint to Nell Gwyn:

Some rowed against the stream, and straggled out
As far as Hounslow Heath, or thereabout;
Some climbéd Highgate Hill, and there they see
The world so large, that they amazed be.
Yea, some are gone so far, that they do know
Ere this, how wheat is made, and malt doth grow.

The river, too, was a thoroughfare, used not only for business but also for pleasure-visits. Its banks

were green slopes. No warehouse, no factory, disfigured the shore on the one side or the other. Even in the middle of London, the river looked as lovely as it now does at Staines or Pangbourne: and the mansions of great noblemen rose in majestic detachment along its northern bank from Whitehall to the Temple. The houses were gabled, built of timber, and lattice-windowed. Every Londoner has looked with pride and affection upon the three seventeenth-century houses that startle the stranger, and still do business, in Holborn. They are probably larger than most of the middle-class houses of the period, but if we multiply them in imagination by many thousands, and picture those many thousands of wooden houses huddling close together over cobbled streets, we shall see London as Nell Gwyn saw it in her childhood. We shall have to work our imaginations harder if we are to smell it as it then smelt: for sanitation was in its infancy and, apart from the excrement of dogs and horses, the streets were made malodorous by the daily emptying of slops.

People lived in the City. In fact, it would have been impossible to refer snobbishly to anyone as being suburban because there were no suburbs—or not in our meaning of the word. Mr. Pepys, for example, lived in Seething Lane, near Fenchurch Street, and if we remember this, we can understand his extreme perturbation during the terror and glory of the Great Fire. St. Paul's was a building without a dome. Covent Garden Market was a fine open square, a piazza, a fashionable promenade. London Bridge was a lane between little squat houses; and if Nell Gwyn walked over it, after the Restoration, she would have passed under the impaled and decomposing heads of the men who had sent King Charles the First to his death. When, again, John Evelyn refers to "the field near the Town which they

call Hyde Park," he had innocently used a phrase which for us has magic in it. As Nell's life unfolded, Bloomsbury Square was laid out, flanked by the new houses of the great; and by the time that she was thirty, people were beginning to talk of Knightsbridge and Kensington as amusing places of relaxation for the rich. It is true that they also drove in their coaches to Epsom, but, as Mr. Pepys intimates, the journey in 1660 was a serious undertaking; comparable with a land journey to St. Ives in 1930. They even travelled to Bath—an enterprise that corresponds with a journey (not by air) to Munich. Moreover, we must bear in mind that there were highwaymen in Piccadilly, and that no journey was safe at night.

During the years of Nell's infancy the Puritans extinguished all open jollity from one end of England to the other. The maypoles came down. Morris-dancing was a grave sin. All the theatres were closed. Even a baronet (Sir Charles Sedley) was fined in Hyde Park for driving in his coach during the hours of Divine Service. Far away in stubborn puritan Hitchin a zealot was writing tracts to which he gave the resounding titles of "Bells Founder confounded, or Sabianus confuted with his damnable Sect," and "Thunder from the Throne of God against the Temple of Idols." We do an injustice to Oliver Cromwell when we suppose that he himself was an extremist. On the contrary he even allowed Sir William Davenant, a life-long and irrepressible theatre-lover, to give one or two special performances. Sir William, in his effort to make the Government unbend toward the drama, cunningly suggested that plays were less abominable than certain alternative amusements. He argued the desirability of entertaining "a new generation of youth uningaged in the late differences, of which there is

a numerous growth since the warre, who should be withdrawne from licentiousnesse, gaming and discontent." And, for the matter of that, the pre-Commonwealth actors did surreptitiously produce plays, from time to time, at the Red Bull Inn: but as often as not the Puritan troopers arrived in the middle of the performance and carried the actors away to the magistrate and a prison. Actors fared rather more happily in the provinces where they performed a number of comic pieces without, it seems, much opposition. The puritans did not shut the theatres only because they regarded plays as wicked and dressing-up as anti-scriptural, but also because the theatres undoubtedly promoted much illicit sexual intercourse. Again, we ought to remember that if the Commonwealth Government closed the theatres, it also put a stop to the brutality of baiting bears and bulls—perhaps chiefly for the same reason. One of its earliest actions was to send troopers to the Bear Garden, where they shot the seven bears which were kept ready for use in our old English sport; nor, so far as I can find out, were animals ever again openly tormented for the amusement of the people.

The serious half of the English nature had never before so thoroughly suppressed the boyish half: nor was it until the mid-Victorian period that a sense of other people's wickedness was again so widely diffused. Every puritan, as we know from American history, tends to regard himself as his brother's keeper. So it was then in England, and if so many of the gravest puritans had not already migrated to New England, our national character would have taken longer to recover its balance. In the grim heyday of puritanism a man was hard pressed to find any amusement at all. In May 1654 John Evelyn wrote that the Mulberry Garden was "now

the only place of refreshment about the town for persons of the best quality to be exceedingly cheated at; Cromwell and his partisans having shut up and seized on Spring Gardens [Vauxhall], which till now had been the usual rendezvous for the ladies and gallants at this season." Up at the Universities, however, exuberance did occasionally break through. Young men were not always able to resist the bottle, but even at these times they seem to have kept watch over their conversation. On a day of October in 1653, for instance, when Nell Gwyn had been tumbling about in the squalor of the Coal Yard, two undergraduates at Cambridge were admonished in front of the Fellows "for having been scandalously overserved with drink the night before," and one of the two was Samuel Pepys who, a dozen years afterwards, became Nell's instant admirer.* When he revisited Cambridge, in later life, he wrote that he "could find nothing at all left of the old preciseness in their discourse, specially on Saturday nights": and he had evidently enquired into this change of mood among the undergraduates, because he adds that "Mr. Zanchy told me that there was no such thing nowadays among them at any time."

Perhaps we incline too much to think of the Civil War as a purely political conflict. It was equally a conflict of attitudes toward life. Education seems to have been at sixes and sevens. "All relations were confounded," says Clarendon, "by the several sects of religion, which discountenanced all forms of reverence and respect, as relics and marks of superstition. Children asked not the blessing of their

* Apparently this heavy drinking was inspired by a Mr. Peachell who wanted to celebrate his taking of a Master's degree. In after years his nose became so red that Mr. Pepys would not be seen with him in public.

parents, nor did they"—the parents—"concern themselves with the education of their children; but were well content that they"—the children—"should take any course to maintain themselves, that they"—the parents—"might be free from that expense." He even goes so far as to say that "parents had no authority over their children, nor children any obedience or submission to their parents": and if we imagine that all the girls of the Commonwealth walked with downcast eyes, we should correct our mistake by realising that girls, even then, were, as usual, going from bad to worse. "They conversed," says Clarendon, "without any circumspection or modesty, and frequently met at taverns or common eating-houses."* The puritans, in short, having preached so strenuously the vileness of man, the hollowness of kingship and the wrongness of dividing Christians into social classes, had given an impetus to the natural rebellion of youth against age. Toward the end of their domination a new decade of "mad drinking lords" and irrepressible young people had grown up: and knowing, by the example of modern Italy, how one strong personality can put a spell upon a nation, we can guess how greatly the effervescence of youth increased when Cromwell was succeeded by his son "Tumble-down-Dick." No laws, however stern, could make all the young men of England unnaturally godly, and the "mad drinking lords" were already "living very high"—that is to say, "frequenting taverns, cock-fightings and illicit performances at the Cockpit at Drury Lane, or the Red Bull in St. John's Street."

The Civil War was only an intense manifestation—the most intense which we have experienced—of a

* These passages from Clarendon are quoted by V. de Sola Pinto in his delightful book *Sir Charles Sedley*, and my debt to him does not end with this borrowing.

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civil war that is waged incessantly in the nature of every Englishman. He is both Roundhead and Cavalier, and his difficulty is to adjust the conflicting interests of the two. During the Commonwealth he had artificially imprisoned the Cavalier aspect of his nature. It was as though a depression from Scotland had spread rapidly southward. With the Restoration, as everyone knows, one excess followed the other, and the Cavalier danced too jubilantly on the prostrate spirit of the Puritan.

IV

LONDON AFTER THE RESTORATION

WHEN Charles came back to his kingdom, Nell Gwyn was ten years old—quite old enough to have stood with her sister Rose among the vociferous crowds that waited to see him go by: and what is more likely than that the street-urchin dropped a curtsey to the man who was to be her lover? Nothing, certainly, would have prevented her from watching the great maypole, with a crown on the top of it, hoisted up once more in the Strand. There was never, perhaps, more jubilation in London, and never more reckless drinking. Gentlemen, kneeling in the June dust, drank the King's health until they could drink it no longer; and when they had sufficiently recovered, they betook themselves to the taverns and lifted their elbows again. Everyone, no matter how he had behaved during the Commonwealth, now persuaded himself that he was a born Royalist. Poor Mr. Pepys, dining with an old school-fellow and certain other country gentlemen, was terrified lest his early acquaintance might "remember that I was a great Roundhead when I was a boy"; and particularly lest he should call to mind "the words that I said the day the King was beheaded—that, were I to preach upon him, my text should be 'The memory of the wicked shall rot.' " The change of spirit had already been symbolically enacted when the naval tailors were cutting out pieces of yellow cloth in the form of a crown and the initials C.R., and sewing them into the ships' flags. It was also symbolised, though unintentionally, by two gifts which the King had just

accepted. At Dover the Mayor had presented him with a bible: "the thing," said Charles, "I love above all things in the world." At Canterbury the Recorder had offered him a golden tankard—and Charles, being humorous and quick-witted, must have been sorely tempted to use the phrase a second time.

London, unquestionably, had put down the bible and taken up the tankard: and for the rest of Nell's life she lived in a dangerous, high-spirited and feverish community. It is difficult for us to realise the roughness, the frequent brutality, of the time. We think of it far too much in terms of ceremonial dances and graceful or exuberant clothes. Only a century ago, at a fair in the north, men trampled to death an inoffensive gingerbread-seller;* and in Somerset, during the Napoleonic Wars, an escaped monkey was hanged by villagers who supposed it to be a Frenchman. Earlier still by a hundred and fifty years, the manners of the ordinary Englishman were liable to lapses of schoolboy savagery. Even in the daytime there was always danger of being mixed up in a brawl, and

When Night

Darkens the streets, then wander forth the Sons
Of Belial, flown with insolence and wine.

It was not only thieves and wastrels but also young men-about-town who made up bands that terrorised all home-going folk. The records of the period frequently refer to "Tom Killigrew and his Mohocks" as a menace to anyone, man or woman. The sword at a gentleman's side was no mere ornament, for there was practically no public protection and every man had to take care of himself, and of his women

* "Lord" George Sanger's Autobiography.

folk. To be a High Constable "is a post of honour," writes one country gentleman, "that requires greater abilities both of mind and purse than I pretend to be master of": and so poor was the quality of those willing to serve as "lower constables" that as Blackmore scathingly observed, "Of the extent of their powers, considering what manner of men are for the most part put into their office, it is perhaps very well that they are generally kept in ignorance." As for the night watchmen who were supposed to safeguard the property and the persons of London citizens, they were (as Fielding says) "chosen out of those poor old decrepit people who are, from their want of bodily strength, rendered incapable of getting a livelihood by work. These men, armed only with a pole, which some of them are scarce able to lift, are to secure the persons and houses of His Majesty's subjects from the attacks of gangs of young, bold, stout, desperate and well-armed villains. If the poor old fellows should run away from such enemies, no one, I think, can wonder, unless it be that they were able to make their escape." Applicants for the post of watchmen were sometimes actually "rejected and reprimanded" as being too sturdy for the work entailed.*

Sentimentalists ought to learn by heart a brief passage from Pepys's Diary in which he shows that a rakish baronet of the period could not be trusted to behave with decency to a gentlewoman. Pepys's attitude toward Sir Charles Sedley is like that of a little boy toward the school bully. When, for example, in the passage that I have in mind, Pepys had taken his wife to a place of amusement, he notes that he was greatly upset to see Sir Charles come into the room; that he withdrew his wife to an in-

* W. Kent. *London for Everyman*.

conspicuous corner; and that he was much relieved because Sedley apparently did not see them. As for the need of some protection in the streets at night, both by illumination and by policing, Pepys is again our authority for showing how desirable it was. He was returning from a happy jaunt with his wife and three girls when the coachman of their hired hackney-carriage, guided by a linkboy, drove them, he says, "from London Wall into Coleman Street, and would persuade me that I lived there. And the truth is that I did think that he and the linkman had contrived some roguery; but it proved to be only a mistake of the coachman; but it was as cunning a place to have done us a mischief in, as any I know . . . while nobody could be called to help us."

The mob was, in fact, uneducated and brutish: redeemed only by its inborn English good-humour and sense of fair play. The town gentry were often scholars but quite as often swaggering bullies who dishonoured their social status. We must remember, too, that anyone could drink as much, at any time of the day or night, as his purse permitted: and a Restoration tavern was no musical comedy inn. It was, wrote a contemporary, "an Academy of Debauchery, where the Devil teaches the seven deadly sins instead of Sciences; a Tipling School a degree above an Ale-house, where you may be drunk with more credit and Apology; 'tis the Rendezvous of Gallants, the Good Fellowes' Paradise, and the Miser's Terrour. . . . 'Tis a *Bedlam* of Wits, where men are rather *mad* than *merry*; here, one breaking a Jest on the *Drawer*, or perhaps a *Candlestick* or a *Bottle* over his Crown; there, another repeating scraps of Old Plays or some Bawdy Song . . . whilst all, with loud hooting and laughing, confound the noise of *Fidlers* who are properly

called a *Noise*, for no Musick can be heard for them."*

"Where the London of 1660," says Bryant, "differed from ours was in its dirt and its beauty." Taste had not yet atrophied in the English people. There was beauty of architecture wherever a man might walk, though the building of the Restoration period had not the graciousness, the dignity or the hospitable air of a Tudor house. Architecture, like drama, had lost its earlier nobility. There was beauty, again, in the clothes that anybody wore, from a Duke to a Quaker, from the Queen to the London milkmaids: and in that age when every object was made by hand, there was a beauty of furniture, crockery and plate which must make any of us, who still care for grace or loveliness in the detail of living, sigh for a standard of excellence which can never come back. On the other hand, we must not forget that smallpox was so common that people took no notice of it unless the number of persons who were coming out of their houses to be "aired" was unusually large. We can safely assume, also, that syphilis was widespread. There were times, moreover, when the huge flaxen wig of even so great a man as the Duke of Buckingham "stank." Indeed, when a gentleman found that his wig had become really verminous, he was rather annoyed than disgusted. Again, Mr. Pepys, who deemed nothing unworthy of inclusion in his secret diary, records the taking of only one bath in seven years. On this great occasion he went into the medicinal waters at Bath, and wondered whether it were sanitary to bathe where so many had bathed before him. He also says, elsewhere, that his wife

* *The Character of a Tavern* (1675). Quoted by V. de Sola Pinto.

has been making herself clean after being "in dirt" for four or five weeks.

The latter part of the seventeenth century has certain tendrils that connect it with our own. Indeed, it has rightly been said that the modern world began at the Restoration. The Royal Society was founded. Men, weary of the contending sects, turned with an avid interest to scientific experiment. Newspapers were issued—the *True Domestic Intelligence*, for example, and *True News, or Mercurius Anglicus*. Charles the Second paid a bill for "goffe-clubs." He also attended greyhound races. Even the modern form of the stage, and of the theatre itself, dates from his time: and perhaps we could say also, thinking of Dryden's prefaces to his plays, that prose then became for the first time so modern in style that we can forget that the writer was wearing the costume of another age. It would be a misjudgment, I think, to suppose that the sexual laxity of our own time resembles the wild sexual licence which flourished throughout Charles's reign. The comedies of the period show that the men of the Restoration thought lasciviously about women. They prided themselves on "speaking more wit than the poets of the last age wrote," and they could certainly turn a phrase more neatly than the Elizabethans; but this greater sophistication made them think and talk of sexual life in the knowing manner of a nasty-minded schoolboy, not with the robust acceptance of fundamental facts which the Elizabethans expressed. In this respect, the Elizabethans are like farmers talking about their livestock; the Restoration playwrights, like men who are putting their heads together in a smoking-room after dinner.

It is, however, a common mistake to imagine that in Charles's time the whole of England was given up to an orgy of drunkenness and fornication. Apart

from the shopkeepers and the skilled workmen, of whom we know so little, there were sober and high-minded men living within a stone's-throw of the Sons of Belial. There is nobility and pathos in Pepys's painful effort to see no more of his maid, Deborah Willett, and to remain faithful to his wife. She even accused him of dreaming about "the girl."* Moreover, Milton did not die until Charles had been reigning for fourteen years: and Charles himself died some years before Baxter, Evelyn and Bunyan.

* The passages that reveal his moral agony are not included in the abridged editions, and their omission causes us to underestimate Pepys's character.

V

BAREFOOT (1661)

MRS. GWYN was obviously one of the parents who "did not concern themselves with the education of their children, but were well content that they should take any course to maintain themselves." I am not sure of what Rose was doing within a year or two of the Restoration, but she was probably up to no good and already associating with shady persons. Nell, at the age of eleven or twelve, was doing her best to earn food for herself and brandy for her mother by hawking fish and vegetables within a short distance of her slum. There is also no doubt that she was learning to give as good as she got in the matter of backchat with the boys of the neighbourhood. It is lucky for us that in the time of her fame there were a few persons who did not love her but, on the contrary, did their best to humiliate her (a vain hope!) by broadcasting assertions about her lowly origin and infamous upbringing. Sir George Etheredge, one of the wittiest and one of the worst among the rakes, wrote a lampoon called "Mrs. Nelly's Complaint," and in this he makes her say:

You that have seen me in my youthful age
Preferred from stall of turnips to the stage.

The Earl of Rochester, a disgusting bounder, who, fortunately, died early of his debaucheries, outlined the beginnings of her biography by describing her as the "anoointed Princess, Madam Nelly,"

PRETTY WITTY NELL

Whose first employment was, with open throat,
To cry fresh herrings even ten a groat;
Then was by Madam Ross exposed to town,—
I mean to those who will give half-a-crown;
Next in the Playhouse she took her degree
As men commence at University.
No doctors, till they've masters been before;
So she no player was, till first a whore.

If anyone had pitied her, she would certainly have laughed: but the poor, even the extremely poor, were not then thought to be pitiful. We know, from Dryden, that it was God who had made them poor,* and we may therefore assume that Man would not have cared to tamper with the divine arrangement. She would have laughed because she was merry-minded, because she had never known any playground or school but the streets, because she found as much amusement as hardship in her life, and because she was devoted to her sister and mother. She could not have remained in obscurity for long: she was too charming, too vital, too clever; but, looking backward upon the accomplished pattern of destiny, we can relish the extraordinary romance of her half-length life when we turn the beam of imagination upon those exalted persons who, in so short a time, were to become the close friends, or the keen enemies, of the pretty, impudent little girl who was now beguiling purchasers with her musical cry of "Ten herrings a groat!"

King Charles, at this time, was infatuated with Barbara Villiers. We Londoners have still a link with this maddening woman, for Cleveland Place and Cleveland Row are named after the title which the King bestowed upon her. I cannot think of any infatuation which is more difficult to fathom. It is

* "And God will aid the poor, Who made them so."

not as though Charles was an inexperienced lover. He would probably have had, even at this date, to pause before answering if anyone had asked him the number of women with whom he had carnally consorted; and he had already more than one illegitimate child. The first, however, and the best loved, was the brainless and beautiful Duke of Monmouth. Charles was no novice; nor was he a man who stood at the mercy of women by reason of adoring them and believing that they were of finer stuff than men. His nature had a quite abnormal need of feminine magnetism, but no woman ever enslaved him to the point of being able to make him do anything which he would not have done in cold blood. Here, then, was a greedy, selfish, hysterical, vain, shallow, loveless woman and one who, subsequently at least, became so promiscuous in her sex affairs that she might have chatted, almost on an equality, with the Empress Catherine or even with Messalina herself. She might, like the silly lady of fashion in one of Rochester's bawdy satires, have said:

I find myself rediculously grown
 Embarrass, with my being out of Town:
 Rude and untaught, like any *Indian* Queen,
 My Country nakedness is strangely seen.
 How is Love governed, Love that rules the state;
 And pray, who are the men most worn of late?

Pepys greatly admired her beauty—for a time; and so, presumably, did Charles. Few modern eyes would find her portraits alluring, and we must therefore suppose that she was a first-rate specimen of a type which could only appeal to her own generation. Charles, I believe, despite his obvious defects, had a certain pity for women; recognising their economic disadvantages, understanding how they need wealth as flowers need water, and finding

it impossible to be harsh to creatures whom he regarded as quaint playthings—very much as he regarded his spaniels. No woman could get the better of him. He always remained in control of the relationship because he never lost his heart. For this reason he did not fear women, and he would indulgently look on, I am confident, at the most dramatic “scene” which any of his ladies could contrive.

As for Sir Charles Sedley and Lord Buckhurst, they were foregathering, several times a week, at the fashionable Rose Tavern, in Russell Street: sharpening their wits, the one against the other; drinking copiously, whoring widely, reading the best in the literature of several countries, and writing dexterous verse. No sooner had the old broken-down theatres re-opened than these two young noblemen would scheme to bring something of French artistry and sauciness to the London stage. They were boon companions, and perhaps were as truly friends as any two men could be in their smart and cynical world: but in justice to both of them we must keep in mind that their impromptu wit and style in conversation would utterly disconcert the philistine smart world of to-day, and that, with all their folly and vice, they were excellent writers, men of high culture and (Buckhurst in particular) men of extraordinarily fine taste in literature.

And away in Paris, ignorant that she would ever come to England, was Louise de Quéroutailles: a “Breton brunette,” with a perceptible cast in one eye: a small girl, one year older than Nell, but of ancient family, well educated, fastidious as the Princess who would not sleep on the pea, and fated to become for fifteen years the implacable rival and the butt of Nell Gwyn. Lastly, out in Rome, was Hortense Mancini, a niece of the great Cardinal

Mazarin, he who is embalmed forever in the exciting pages of the good Dumas. Here was a Roman girl of dark, smouldering, magnificent and overpowering beauty—beauty of the eternal order—for whose hand (in wedlock) Charles had vainly asked while he was still a penurious exile. In time she was to wander, a superb adventuress, from one court of Europe to another, and finally to make an easy conquest of Charles and to settle in England. At present, in 1661, she was newly married to an oddity named the Duc Mazarin, and had lately been somewhat helped to set up house by an agreeable gift from the Cardinal of twenty-eight million francs. She might never have disturbed—and amused—Nell Gwyn if her husband had not been so sexually abnormal. She, with her rich temperament, could never have harmonised with a gentleman whose sense of the indecent was so developed that not only did he take a hammer and demolish the nude statues which he had inherited, but also forbade his women servants to milk the cows.

They were all to meet, and their lives to mingle more or less closely; but at this date not one of them had so much as heard of little Nell Gwyn, nor did she, in her cheerful poverty, ever suppose that she would emerge from the multitude of the hungry and obscure.

VI

IN A BROTHEL (1663)

ROSE and she had clearly been left to fend for themselves, and of Rose we very soon hear unhappy news. Nell now entered upon that second phase of her education to which Lord Rochester so baldly referred in his rhymes. When we are walking down Drury Lane we pass a turning called Macklin Street. In Nell's time it was called Lewknor's Lane, and it was there that "Madam Ross" kept her bawdy-house. Madam Ross, a libidinous and enterprising woman who was a familiar figure to any young man with wild oats to sow, made a practice of scouting the neighbourhood for girls who were suited to her business. She also engaged a certain number of girls who, as it were, "lived out" and assisted her merely as decoys who conducted men (or likely girls) to the house in Lewknor's Lane. We do not know how it happened, but when we next have news of Nell Gwyn she is about twelve or thirteen and is working on Madam Ross's indoor staff.

It seems likely that Madam, prowling in search of prey for her brothel, took a fancy to the cheeky and winsome child who was hawking fish. If Mrs. Gwyn was consulted at all, no doubt Madam Ross explained to her satisfaction that this change meant a financial rise for Nelly and more brandy for her mother. According to Nell herself, and no one was ever more honest, she was "brought up in a brothel to serve strong water"—spirits, in a word—"to the guests": from which we may gather that she was engaged as a servant-girl rather than as a daughter of the game. Even Madam Ross may have hesitated to misuse

her at the age of, say, twelve and a half; but no doubt she was confident that the child would train on. The child, too, must have been precocious. Very low life is decidedly a sexual forcing-house. The benevolent Dasent indulges a pious hope that her extreme youth saved her from "the greater indignities offered to girls of tender age in the abodes of misery and vice," but we may reasonably doubt whether his hope corresponds with the truth. Nell's attraction for men was always exceptional. Half-drunken men in a Restoration brothel were not likely to consider anything but their own pleasure, and Nell, with her street experience, would have thought of sexual intimacy between men and girls as merely normal and inevitable. Nor, again, can we either suppose that all Madam's clients would consider that Nell was expensive at "half-a-crown," or think that Madam, if approached on the matter, would have stoutly resisted a firm offer.

Nell, in the course of her new work, must have heard the most obscene language that was audible even in an unusually obscene age; and it was there, very likely, that she laid the foundation of that great stock of oaths for which she was afterwards well known. There, too, she must have obtained, young though she was, an extensive knowledge of the antic effects produced by the combination of lust and drink. People in those days were more body-conscious than we are. Even in the palace at Whitehall men and women would joke in public about pregnancy; and the foulest speeches in the work of Etheredge, Dryden and Wycherley are probably elegant and insipid by comparison with the talk in Lewknor's Lane.

While she was selling fish, and again while she was helping Madam Ross, Nell heard, all day long, the hammering and the shouting and the swearing

that accompanied the erection of a great new theatre in Drury Lane. And every day, when she went out for a breath of air, she saw the theatre gradually mounting. For no sooner was it certain that Charles would come back from exile than the old or middle-aged actors began to foregather, to hunt out old play-books, and to scheme a re-opening of the theatres. Sir William Davenant, after his long and galling inactivity, rubbed his hands with delight at the prospect of being able at last to show what he could do in the theatre—and what the French had done. Betterton and Hart and Lacey and Kynaston abandoned whatever work they had been doing “in Oliver’s time,” and began to rehearse in earnest. Of these four famous actors, Hart was the eldest. Before the Civil War he had acted womens’ parts. During the Commonwealth he had played secretly at the Red Bull and at the houses of noblemen. Betterton and Kynaston had been clerks in a bookshop: but Kynaston at least must have had previous experience or a marked aptitude for acting. At the Restoration he was twenty. A year later he was an actor of importance. The Cockpit and the Red Bull were now in a bad way, but a broken-down theatre was better to an enthusiast than no theatre at all, and hardly had the King landed in England than delighted Londoners were again crowding to see plays, many of them for the first time in their lives.

Charles and his exiled courtiers brought with them a taste for the nimble satires of Molière and the orotund tragedies of Corneille. They had also become accustomed, in Paris and elsewhere, to theatre architecture and stage devices which, of necessity, were almost twenty years in advance of anything that remained in London. Within a year of his home-coming Charles had decided to build a large up-to-date playhouse. It was greatly needed.

IN A BROTHEL

In September 1661, Mr. and Mrs. Pepys went to the Cockpit, in Drury Lane, "to the French comedy, which was so ill-done, and the scenes and company and everything else so nasty and out of order and poor, that I was sick all the while in my mind to be there." In fact, to avoid "the foolery of the farce," which wound up the entertainment, they went home early. The fine new theatre that Nell watched rising was to be called The King's House. It stood on the site of our present Drury Lane Theatre; and it was there alone that Nell Gwyn played during her brief and triumphant career as an actress.

VII

ROSE GWYN'S MISFORTUNE (1663)

ROSE GWYN, who was older than Nell, had already, it seems, been marketing her looks. They were fond of each other and therefore, no doubt, were still in touch. For some time Nell must have envied the pace at which Rose was bettering her position:

But what are buds that ne'er disclose
The long'd-for sweetness of the Rose? *

Then, suddenly, one day when she was thirteen, Nell heard with dismay that her sister had been clapped into Newgate prison. Unluckily we do not know what charge had landed her there. Perhaps it was petty theft. We do know, however, that while she was in prison she wrote (or much more probably, dictated) two letters to gentlemen of considerable standing. She implored them to release her "from this woeful place of torment until a pardon is pleaded." Her father, she adds, had lost everything in the service of the late King, and it was hard, therefore, that she should perish in a prison. One of the gentlemen to whom she appealed was Thomas Killigrew, a great favourite of Charles the Second, a licensed joker in the Court, and a man who almost immediately was to become manager of the new King's Theatre. The other was Cupbearer to the Duke of York. Each of them took the trouble to visit her in prison: a fact which is unaccountable, considering the extreme obscurity of the Gwyn family, unless we assume that these men had been intimately

* Rochester: in a poem not worthy of this pretty couplet.

associated with Rose. And seeing that she obtained a surprising reprieve, we must assume that both men bestirred themselves in her behalf.

The suspense that she endured in that woeful place of torment was ultimately dissolved by the arrival of a document, signed by one of the King's officers. It ran as follows:*

Whereas we are given to understand that Rose Gwynne, having been convicted of — at the late sessions held at the Old Bailey, was yet reprieved by the bench, before judgement, and reserved as an object of our princely compassion and mercy, upon humble suit made to us in favour of the said Rose, we have thought good hereby to signify our Royal pleasure to you, and that you forthwith grant her her liberty and discharge upon bail first taken, in order to the suing out her pardon and rendering our gracious mercy and compassion to be effectual.

It is easy to picture the celebration that followed Rose's release—how Nell and she would walk from the prison to the attic in Coal Yard, and how Nell, having wheedled an extra potion of strong water from Madam Ross, would ensure that their mother should adequately rejoice.

Rose, however, was not yet at the end of her troublous adventures. In that age girls did not always wait to be out of their 'teens before they married. Mrs. Pepys, for example, was only fifteen when Samuel married her: and Rose, not long after her sojourn in Newgate, married a dare-devil named John Cassells. With respect to John Cassells, the dependable Dasent surmises that he was a highway-man of that name. We shall find that, a few years later, he jumped into exceedingly hot water.

* In this and in other legal documents and certain letters which I shall quote I have added punctuation for the convenience of the reader.

VIII

THE NEW THEATRE (1663)

SO early as the latter part of the sixteenth century there had been women-players on the Continent. A year after the Restoration men were still playing women's parts on the London stage. In 1661, for instance, young Kynaston, a man with the right kind of beauty, played the part of Evadne in *The Maid's Tragedy*, and made a hit with it. When, therefore, Pepys and his wife saw "the French comedy," they watched men playing the parts of women, and Pepys did not mention the point simply because he never supposed that he would see women upon the stage.

However, in 1662, the King made a new profession available to women, and some of them responded with alacrity. At the end of a tedious long document Charles initiated this, the most important of all changes in the history of the theatre, with the words:

And we do likewise permit and give leave that all women's parts, to be acted in either of the said two Companies for the time to come, may be performed by women so long as these recreations which, by reason of the abuses aforesaid were scandalous and offensive, may by such reformation be esteemed not only harmless delights but useful and instructive representations of human life to such of our good subjects as shall resort to the same.*

Whether this unaccustomed propinquity of girls at rehearsals and performances unduly excited the actors we cannot know. That does at least seem to

* For the full document, see Appendix III.

be the likeliest explanation of Killigrew's desperate device for making the young men work. He told Pepys, at a later time, that he had decided "to keep a woman on purpose at twenty shillings a week to satisfy eight or ten of the young men of his House, whom till he did so he could never keep to their business, and now he do." *

The whole of the theatrical world was in a ferment. Actors were hurriedly drilling the likeliest of their girl-friends in the rudiments of stage work. Authors, including John Dryden, who speedily became the literary giant of his period and one who was immeasurably better known than blind old Milton, seized their chance of capturing a new market and began to write plays on the two French models. Most of them, caught by the current of a frivolous era, tried to bring a new spriteliness into English comedy. A few decided to show their countrymen what tragedy could become in an age of higher culture than the Elizabethan. Dryden made a determined effort to imitate the French by composing massive and grandiloquent plays in rhymed couplets. Edmund Waller and four reverent disciples attempted the same unmanageable task when they collaborated in a translation of Corneille's *La Mort de Pompée*, each making himself responsible for one act: and in this vain labour of love the poet's adjutants were Lord Buckhurst, Sir Charles Sedley, Sir Edward Filmer and Sidney Godolphin.

On May the 7th, 1663, the King's Theatre in Drury Lane opened its doors at last; and Nell, who was now a little more than thirteen, was not a girl to miss the amusement of seeing the great gentlemen and their ladies go in. Performances, moreover, then began at three in the afternoon, and at that hour

* Wheatley's ten-volume edition of the Diary.

Nell, in her brothel, would probably be disengaged. The King and his council, as we have seen, had decreed that London should have two theatres, and two only. The King's Theatre was under Charles's patronage. The Duke's Theatre, which was built soon after, came under the patronage of his brother. They were keen rivals, and provision was even made that no player was to pass from the one company to the other.

The manager of the King's Theatre was Tom Killigrew, the King's friend. Sir William Davenant was in charge of the Duke's house. They had to face a peculiar situation. There were, at present, no new plays. There was also no copyright in any of the dramatic works that were available. The King, emulating Solomon, suggested that the two managers should cut in halves the dramatic literature that existed, and they agreed to this sensible plan. In our judgment Killigrew got the best of the bargain. He secured all the best plays of Ben Jonson: *Volpone*, *The Silent Woman*, *The Alchemist*, *Bartholomew Fair*, *Every Man in his Humour*, *Every Man out of his Humour*, *Catiline's Conspiracy* and *Sejanus*. Remembering that at this time the world regarded Beaumont and Fletcher as the highest peaks of our drama, it seems far from just that Killigrew should have been allowed to corner the whole of their works. However, he and Davenant made a division of Shakespeare's plays which they probably thought to be fair. To us it will seem, somewhat to our relief, that Sir William at last did better than his opponent. Killigrew pocketed *Othello*, *Julius Caesar*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *Henry the Fourth* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; but even this tempting list was outdone by those which Davenant could present—*The Tempest*, *Much Ado about Nothing*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Twelfth Night*, *Henry the Eighth*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth* and

Hamlet. It is really astounding that neither manager should have cared to put in a claim for *As You Like It*.

Not half a century had gone by since the death of Shakespeare, and one of the theatres for certain, and in all probability each of them, had a direct link with him. Tom Killigrew's chief actor, at the King's Theatre, was Charles Hart, a grandson of Shakespeare's sister, Joan Hart. Sir William Davenant, according to a reputable tradition, was even more closely connected. Aubrey, the antiquarian, states that Shakespeare visited Stratford every year, and that he was accustomed to break his journey at Oxford and to lodge there at an inn, kept by one John d'Avenant. Mrs. d'Avenant was "a very beautiful woman, and of very good witt and of conversation extremely agreeable." Her second son, William, was born in 1605, and for a long time it was popularly held in Oxford that Shakespeare (who would then be forty-one) was his father. In later life, we learn, Sir William was "contented enough to be thought his son": and, for what it is worth, there is the evidence of his Christian name. We must remember, too, that during the Restoration epoch Shakespeare's reputation stood high but was limited to England, and that, compared with its present dimensions, it was a sapling by the side of a giant oak. Any man of the time would have preferred, had it been biologically practicable, to claim fatherhood of Beaumont and Fletcher.

The two managers were men of imagination and energy. During the Plague Killigrew went over to Paris on purpose to study theatrical improvements: but Davenant seemed to his contemporaries the more important man,

Since he it was, this later age,
Who chiefly civilised the stage;

and no one, until quite lately, would have doubted that his achievements were as admirable as his intentions. He "civilised the stage" by introducing elaborate scenery and by setting up "the proscenium arch." In this way—by framing his actors and separating them from the audience—he gave the theatre the typical form which is familiar to us, and incalculably affected the construction of future plays. Nevertheless, we are not so much concerned with Sir William as with Tom Killigrew, for it was the latter who, in a year or two, had the luck to meet with Nell Gwyn and the insight to give her an opportunity of becoming a sensational box-office attraction. Perhaps it was a pity. If Sir William had found her, she would presumably have played the part of Viola. And what would Mr. Pepys have said about that?

IX

SELLING ORANGES AND PIPPINS (1664)

THERE is not really, perhaps, quite so much difficulty, as her biographers make out, in perceiving how Nell escaped from the brothel and obtained a humble, and not wholly dissimilar, position in the King's Theatre. Even the watchful Dasent seems to have forgotten Rose Gwyn. Rose, when in prison, had confidently applied for help to the King's jester, Tom Killigrew. She must have known him well; and when we find that her sister, at the age of fourteen, is working as an orange-girl in Killigrew's playhouse, the supposition that Rose had got this work for her seems obvious. Killigrew himself may have been too important a person to have troubled about the engagement of an orange-girl, but he would certainly have given Rose a pass into his theatre, and once she was there, she could easily have introduced Nell to the person who was responsible for these girls.

That person was soon a well-known character. She went by the nickname of Orange Moll. The orange-girls were a managerial side-attraction, and Orange Moll was in charge of them. They stood in the pit of the theatre, with their backs to the stage, and in addition to selling fruit to thirsty spectators, they were supposed to stimulate the gentlemen with amusing backchat. The public regarded them as a special kind of prostitute, and no one can reasonably doubt that they thought of themselves in the same way. Orange Moll's duty, we may take it, was not to look after their morals but to see that they sold their fruit and their persons to good advantage. In

the comedy called *Tunbridge Wells* we read of a certain woman that "she outdoes a playhouse orange-woman for the politick management of a bawdy intrigue": a passage that presumably means that the leader of the girls, and sometimes the girls themselves, acted as go-betweens if an eligible playgoer desired to make the acquaintance of an actress or of a dubious lady in the audience.

Oranges were at that time a luxury. They cost sixpence each; and it was a point of honour among gentlemen not to haggle over the price. In a book of directions how a young gallant "should behave in all places and company," we find that "the next step is to give a turn to the China orange wench, and give her her own rate for her oranges (for 'tis below a gentleman to stand haggling like a citizen's wife) and then to present the fairest to the next vizard mask"—that is to say, to any female stranger with whom the purchaser fancied that he would like to have a little conversation. The girls made the best of this unwritten law as when, for instance, one of them brazenly told Mr. Pepys that he was still in debt to her for a dozen oranges. This was a monstrous invention that much annoyed him. However, he was always eager to do as great gentlemen did, and so "for quiet" he "bought four-shillings' worth from her at sixpence a-piece."

The orange-girls, then, were a bait for playgoers—comparable with the barmaids of the later Victorian period—and in view of the hand-to-mouth life which she had led in the lowest society of London, we should need to be incurably sentimental if we supposed that Nell Gwyn, young though she was, never made at this time an appointment with an amorous or lascivious stranger. She would only have defended her virtue at the cost of losing her work: nor, indeed, does it seem at all likely that she considered her

virtue to be of much importance. It is true that her horoscope, as we shall find when we examine it, strongly indicates that she was not a natural wanton, but it also suggests that she was so easy-going as to be easily led. The only ground upon which we might believe that she miraculously preserved her purity both at Madam Ross's and while she was an orange-girl is a charming but uncontemporary and unconvincing anecdote.*

In this account she is represented as saying, "My first love, you must know, was a linkboy." Her incredulous listener responds by saying "A *what?*" And at this point Nell is supposed to have replied: "'Tis true, for all the frightfulness of your 'What'! And a very good sort he was—poor Dick; and had the heart of a gentleman. God knows what has become of him; but when I last saw him, he said he would humbly love me to his dying day. He used to say I must have been a Lord's daughter for my beauty, and that I ought to ride in my coach, and behaved to me as if I did. He, poor boy, would light me and my mother home, when we sold our oranges, to our lodgings in Lawkenor's Lane, as if we had been ladies of the land. He said he never felt easy for the evening 'till he had asked me how I did; then he went gaily about his work, and if he saw us housed at night he slept like a prince. I shall never forget a pair of worsted stockings which he brought for my naked feet. It was bitter cold weather and I

* The story comes "from a manuscript note in an interleaved copy of Downe's *Roscius Anglicanus*." The phraseology is highly suspect, but since the account is admittedly second-hand, this may be due to the writer not having known Nell personally. I have transcribed the anecdote from *Nell Gwyn: The Story of her Life*, by Lewis Melville. "A good sort" may be seventeenth-century English, but I should be surprised to hear that it is.

had chilblains which made me hobble about till I cried; and what does poor Richard do but work like a horse and buy me these worsted stockings. My mother bade him put them on; and so he did, and his warm tears fell on my chilblains, and he said he should be the happiest Lord on earth if the stockings did me good." Provided that the story were true, we should have to assume that she had come unscathed from the brothel; for if she had known "lovers" in the more technical sense of the word, she would not have said of the linkboy that he was the "first." If it were true, however, Rochester and Etheredge, in their lampoons, would have told us that Mrs. Gwyn worked side by side with Nell as an orange-girl. It is hard to believe that she followed her chick like an anxious hen, and equally hard to believe that Orange Moll would have considered her to be an attractive or suitable recruit. It seems unlikely, too, that when Nell was an orange-girl both she and her mother should be living, not in Coal Yard, but in Lewknor's Lane—presumably with Madame Ross. An expert might be able to tell us, also, whether the orange-girls really went barefoot in the theatre. And yet, though we may feel that we must reject the tale, it might well be a confused version of a true incident.

If Charles had not made it possible for Nell Gwyn to become an actress, she would probably have remained an orange-girl until some man of means adopted her for his amusement. And after that? She would have passed from one man to another, and might, by means of rising steadily in the social scale, have ended as one of Charles's mistresses. Or, strange as it seems, she might have been rescued from the pit by actual marriage. Virginity was not less rare in 1663 than it is in 1933; and when it is difficult to come by, men make their emotions turn a somer-

sault, and pretend that a woman's earlier lovers do not trouble imagination. The Elizabethan drama is a consistent hymn of praise to the unsullied maiden and the virtuous wife. In the Restoration drama, except in its lumbering heroic tragedies, we have difficulty in finding the one or the other. Sex, in fact, had become comic where once it had been romantic. During the reign of Charles the First no man of any position would have considered a marriage with a girl whose rank and reputation corresponded with those of the orange-wenches: but we can see how astonishing was the change that had passed over society within twenty-five years if we note how the author of the prologue to *A Fool's Preferment* remarks that

A noble peer may to the play repair,
Court the pert damsel with her China-ware—
Nay, marry her, if he please: no one will care.

Nell, however, belonged, in my judgment (which I base upon her horoscope), to a rare type which often misses marriage by giving too readily. It does so because, being fundamentally maternal, it looks upon men, not as would-be-clever simpletons from whom money and marriage is to be extracted, but as wilful and lovable children who must be comforted at any cost. She might, therefore, have passed from man to man, adored and deserted by all of them and, finally, remembered by all of them with tenderness and gratitude.

X

ON THE STAGE (1665)

The Orange-basket her fair Arm did suit,
Laden with Pippins and Hesperian Fruit.
This first Step rais'd, to the wond'ring Pit she sold
The lovely Fruit smiling with Streaks of Gold.
Fate now for her did its whole Force engage,
And from the Pit she's mounted to the Stage:
There in full lustre did her Glories shine,
And, long eclips'd, spread forth their Light divine.
There Hart's and Rowley's* Soul she did ensnare,
And made a King the rival to a Player.

WE would joyously spare these odious rhymes if Lord Rochester had told us instead by what means Nell, who was now fourteen, contrived to cross the candles and, in place of being a gentlemen's toy, became a brilliant member of Tom Killigrew's company.

A fatuous writer who compiled a memoir of Nell Gwyn in 1752 (sixty-five years after her death) ascribes the transformation to the chief tragic actor of the age, Thomas Betterton. We are told, in these obviously fanciful memoirs, that "he advised her to continue her manner of life for some time, and appointed one of his subalterns"—presumably a less important member of the dramatic company to which Betterton belonged—"to pay her frequent visits, and initiate her in the principles of playing. This subaltern . . . was of a constitution sanguine and amorous; he felt the passion he represented; and as love is inseparable from a heart capable of

* "Old Rowley" was one of Charles the Second's several nicknames.

tender sensations, so it is not to be doubted but he made some advances to Nell and some proposals with which, if she complied, she would have an opportunity of relishing those overwhelming transports which poets have displayed with such lavish descriptions and players have uttered in all the ecstasy of fainting lovers." This gushing scribbler has probably told the truth but named the wrong man. He chose Betterton, no doubt, because Betterton did not die until 1710 and was, in 1750, by far the best-known and remembered of Restoration actors. If Betterton had really been Nell's theatrical sponsor, she would presumably have acted at the Duke's Theatre, where Betterton was the leading-man. It is much more likely that Hart and Lacy, two of the principal actors at the King's Theatre, should be substituted for Betterton and the sanguine subaltern. It was they, in all probability, who felt her charm and divined her potential talent. According to Etherege, a certain "merchant," whose name was Duncan, had taken to Nell because of her impudent wit, her physical shapeliness and the unusual smallness of her feet. Duncan, an amorphous figure, is reported to have made her his mistress (when she was fourteen) and to have started her on a stage career. The truth within this hazy tradition is, probably, that in conversation with Hart and Lacy he was so enthusiastic about the attractions of one of the orange-girls that they decided to inspect her for themselves. An old page of manuscript, which can be read in the British Museum, states that "a gentleman of the law carried her from the playhouse by force and deflowered her and placed her safe in the house of Mrs. Crosword Crosswell [*sic*], mentioned in one of Otway's Epilogues. Here she continued for half a year." This gentleman may have carried her off

while she was merely an orange-girl, for Colley Cibber, a reasonably dependable witness, tells us definitely that "Hart introduced Mrs. Gwyn* upon the dramatic boards, and has acquired the distinction of being ranked among that lady's first felicitous lovers† by having succeeded to Lacy in the possession of her charms." Hart, says old Granger, taught her to act, and Lacy taught her to dance. Hart, of these two, was the man of more fame. It is therefore possible that our eighteenth-century sentimentalist should have said that Hart, not having seen her himself, sent Lacy, as his subaltern, to see whether the merchant's enthusiasm was justified, and that it was Lacy whose "tender sensations" prevailed upon Nell to experience (if she did) those "overwhelming transports" which the poets are said to describe. Hart and Lacy were considerably older than Betterton, who, at this time, was not thirty. His rivals, in fact, were pre-war men, and must now have been very near forty or even beyond that melancholy mark. We must imagine, I surmise, that Lacy, having taught Nell to dance for the stage, and having had "possession of her charms," injudiciously spoke to Hart so enthusiastically about her aptitude for the theatre that Hart decided to give her some lessons in speech and deportment: and that he was then so amused and delighted by her confident and disrespectful manner that he gave Lacy to understand that in the future she would be under his own patronage in all ways. Nell, with no moral education, an easy-going nature and a liking for the weakness

* The word "miss," at this time, signified "mistress" in the sexual sense. In the cast of any play all the actresses are called "Mrs.," a contraction, of course, of the word "Mistress": an amusing example of the strange history of words.

† Cibber, we must observe, takes for granted that she had known other lovers.

and vanity of men, would readily have transferred herself from the one to the other: for by this time, no doubt, she, like thousands of girls in every generation, had decided that "men always want it," and took the sexual relationship as a matter of course.

The two actors must very soon have realised what a gold mine they had found. Nell, as an actress, was an immediate success; and, amazing though it may be, at the age of a little more than fifteen she was not only familiar to theatre-goers but had fascinated their senses and touched their hearts. This we know because it is now that the immortal Samuel begins to add substance to our picture of her life. On April the 3rd, 1665, he visited the Duke's Theatre and there witnessed a long-forgotten play "which, being not good," he says, "made Betterton's part and Ianthe's [Mrs. Betterton's] but ordinary too." And then he continues: "All the pleasure of the play was the King and my Lady Castlemaine [Barbara Villiers] were there: and pretty witty Nell, at the King's House, and the younger Marshall sat next us; which pleased me mightily." "At the King's House" means, of course, that, as we should phrase it, Nell and the younger Marshall, of the King's Theatre, were taking a busman's holiday at the rival playhouse: and so at last, by virtue of two lines written casually by Pepys on a spring evening, Nell Gwyn emerges from the mist of conjecture and takes on a definite form.

XI

STAGE FRIENDS (1665)

NO doubt she was unreflective; but remembering how, a few months earlier, she had been selling oranges in the pit and how, perhaps a year earlier, she had been a servant in a brothel, she must have been elated by the marvellous improvement in her conditions and in her prospects. She was already an established member of Killigrew's company and was moving among men and women who were not only celebrated but were also possessed of much higher culture and better manners than any with whom she had previously consorted. No inferiority complex repressed her, and she was temperamentally incapable of being over-awed. She mixed, therefore, on an instant equality with the celebrities of her new world. They were audacious and lively companions. There was, for example, her friend Lacy, who excelled in comic parts and who had some talent for dramatic composition. He "performed all Parts that he undertook," we are told, "to a miracle": and Charles the Second thought of him so highly as to commission portraits of him in three of his most famous parts. He had the advantage, as an actor, of having seen something of real life at its most active, for during the recent war he had served "as lieutenant and quartermaster under Colonel Lord Gerrard."* There was also Charles Hart who, like Lacy, had fought for the late King, having been a lieutenant in a crack regiment—Prince Rupert's Horse. He was evidently a versatile actor, for he

* Montague Summers: Introduction to the Nonesuch edition of Wycherley's Works.

played the bombastic heroes in some of Dryden's ponderous tragedies and also the principal parts in certain extravagant farces. Perhaps he was not so physically beautiful as another of Nell's colleagues, Edward Kynaston (who had once played women's parts with such effect that Mr. Pepys recorded that he was "the loveliest lady that ever I saw in my life," and who afterwards, according to Cibber, "had a piercing eye . . . and a quick imperious vivacity in his tone of voice that painted the tyrant terrible"), but Hart was obviously a persistent lady's man, for, some years later when he must have been close on fifty, he had an affair with Barbara Villiers.

In contriving it, Barbara made use of Rebecca Marshall—"the younger Marshall"—as a go-between. "Beck" Marshall and her sister were important members of the company, and it is the more amusing to know that Rebecca and Nell were going out together at the time when Mr. Pepys first saw them off the stage, if we realise that it was with Rebecca that Nell, in the future, was to have one of her few recorded quarrels. Rebecca seems to have been more self-righteous than she probably had any right to be, and this, no doubt, is why Nell made a much closer friendship with another of her companions—Mary Knipp. A high authority* assures us that "there are very many references" to her "in Pepys' Diary and very few elsewhere." Let us hope that he will discover more elsewhere; for Pepys so often mentions Knipp and Nell in the same breath that they seem, at times, to have been almost inseparable; nor do we ever hear, unless it be once, of any estrangement between them.

Hart, Lacy, Kynaston, Rebecca Marshall and Mary Knipp—they would all be exceedingly dim

* The Rev. Montague Summers.

ghosts, and little more interesting to a modern reader than a glass-case of Restoration costumes in a museum, if they had not been the daily companions of Nell Gwyn and the heroes and heroines of Samuel Pepys. By grace of Nell's friendship and Samuel's infatuation, Mary Knipp, in particular, is secure of a reflected immortality. "Pretty enough," said Pepys, at one point in their association, "but the most excellent, mad-humoured thing, and sings the noblest that ever I heard in my life." At another point in their friendship he reports that he had hoped "to get Mrs. Knipp to us, having wrote a letter to her in the morning, calling myself 'Dapper Dicky' in answer to hers of 'Barbary Allen,' but could not, and am told by the boy that carried my letter, that he found her crying; but I fear she leads a sad life with that ill-natured fellow her husband; so we had a great, but a melancholy dinner." On the following day she had looked in on him, "just to speak with me privately, to excuse her not coming to me yesterday, complaining how like a devil her husband treats her, and so I kissed her and parted." There is also another rueful entry which no one should miss: "After dinner, to cards, and then comes notice that my wife is come unexpectedly to me to town. So I to her. It is only to see what I do, and why I come not home; and she is in the right that I would have a little more of Mrs. Knipp's company before I go away." Mr. Knipp is described as "an ill, melancholy, jealous-looking fellow": in short, such a fellow as a husband invariably seems to be in the eyes of any man who is hunting his pretty wife.

XII

HER FIRST "FIRST NIGHT" (1665)

NELL GWYN, as we should expect, had much more talent for comedy than for tragedy or even romance; and it is astonishing that, throughout her brief and brilliant career as an actress, the management should so often have cast her for "serious parts." According to Granger, "her person, tho' below middle size, was well-turned; she had a good natural air, and a sprightliness which promised every thing in a Comedy. . . . She acted the most spirited and fantastic parts, and spoke a Prologue and Epilogue with admirable address—her flow of spirits sometimes carried her to extravagance, but even her highest flights rather provoked laughter than excited disgust."

The management of the King's Theatre (it should really be called the Theatre Royal) was in the hands of Killigrew, Dryden and Sir Robert Howard. Sir Robert must have been a perpetual nuisance to the dramatist and the impresario, for Shadwell represents him as "a foolish Knight who pretends to understand everything in the World, and will suffer no Man to understand anything in his Company: so foolishly Positive, that he will never be convinced of an Error, though never so grosse." To this John Evelyn adds that Sir Robert was "a gentleman pretending to all manner of arts and sciences, . . . not ill-natured, but insufferably boasting": a type familiar to all theatrical syndicates. Worse yet, he had an itch for dramatic writing. Dryden, we must remember, was now only thirty-four. He had been learning his craft as a playwright but at present had

written only two plays and part of a third. Since he collaborated in this third play (*The Indian Queen*) with Sir Robert, he must have been thankful when they arrived at the last page. None of these trial plays had made much impression; but Dryden was a man of exceptional will-power—indeed, the will-to-excellence in his work is so continuously present that the work remains always readable, however seldom it is genuinely inspired—and his comparative failure did not deter him. He was now able to hand over to Killigrew and Sir Robert the manuscript of an ambitious “heroic” play, written in firm and melodious rhymed couplets or quatrains—*The Indian Emperor*. In this play Nell Gwyn made her first appearance. She played “opposite” Hart and (incredible as it will sound to a young modern actress) at the age of fifteen was cast for the leading feminine part. The kind-hearted Dasent is amazed that she “could have committed such a long and exacting part to memory,” and genially adds that “probably the prompter’s voice was heard somewhat oftener than was altogether agreeable to the management”: an unwarranted suggestion that comes oddly from so chivalrous a mind, for the younger the brain is the stronger its power of memorising will be, as all actors when they have turned forty are well aware, and if the prompter had really been often audible a Restoration audience would not have crowned the play with success.

The following passages, apart from their interest as having been spoken by Nell on the first of all her “first nights,” reveal the masculine grip which Dryden had upon our language. The part of Cydaria*

* In justice to Hereford it is right to mention that the eager Dasent thinks that the name “Cydaria” may have been invented by Dryden in allusion to Nell’s birth in the cider county. Dryden must have been strangely confident of an

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was played by Nell, the part of Cortez by Hart: and I confess to sharing with the genial Dasent a sentimental interest in knowing which were the first lines that she ever spoke on a stage. They were an "aside," uttered in the perturbation of love at first sight. Nell said:

My Father's gone, and yet I cannot go,
Sure I have something lost or left behind!

To which Hart responded, also in an aside:

Like Travellers who wander in the Snow,
I on her beauty gaze till I am blind.

To this Nell replies with:

Thick breath, quick pulse, and heaving of my heart,
All signs of some unwonted change appear:
I find myself unwilling to depart,
And yet I know not why I would be here. . . .

then, speaking openly to Hart, she said:

Stranger, you raise such torments in my breast,
That when I go, if I must go again,
I'll tell my Father you have rob'd my rest,
And to him of your injuries complain.

It is impossible to believe that Nell spoke without some fire the following lines of reproach against a seeming-false lover:

More cruel than the Tyger o'er his spoyl;
And falser than the Weeping Crocodile;
Can you adde Vanity to Guilt, and take
A Pride to hear the Conquests which you make?
Go, publish your renown: let it be said
You have a woman, and that lov'd, betrayed.

unknown actress's talent if he wrote the part for her at a time, we may assume, when she had only begun her training. *The Indian Emperor* is not a piece that could have been scribbled off in a few weeks.

But she can hardly have made much of her attempted suicide or of the lines:

Stay, life, and keep me in the cheerful light;
 Death is too black, and dwells in too much night.
 Thou leav'st me, life, but love supplies thy part,
 And keeps me warm by ling'ring in my heart:
 Yet, dying for him, I thy claim remove;
 How dear it costs to conquer in my love!
 Now, strike! That thought, I hope, will arm my breast.

This rhyming dialogue will almost certainly seem lifeless, laboured and unattractive to most modern readers; but they would, I believe, be astonished by the beauty of its effect if they could hear it well-spoken in a theatre.*

Although Mr. Pepys was horrified by her performance in this play when he saw it revived, she must have acquitted herself with more than credit, for not only did she keep her place in Killigrew's company of players, but became an instant favourite with the public. At first the stars embattled themselves against her, and it looked as though, having made one or two appearances, she might drift into some other occupation. The theatre is, of course, permanently upon its death-bed, and to its native inhabitants every wind seems to be an ill wind that

* Two or three years before he left the Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith, Sir Nigel Playfair decided to produce *Marriage à la Mode*, Dryden's best comedy (the best in, for example, Professor Saintsbury's judgment). He did me the honour of asking me to condense and adapt the play. In the performance there was nothing in the comedy, well played as it was, that could compare in the pleasure felt by the audience with the delivery of a long rhymed scene by Miss Angela Baddeley and Mr. Glen Byam Shaw. The beauty of this scene, amidst the rhodomontade and rattling "wit" of the others, appeared like a dormer-window inappropriately attached to a Palladian mansion.

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will certainly blow nobody any good. Now—at the very outset of her career—an ill wind indeed threatened the London theatres: and for many months the public saw nothing more of Nell Gwyn. Many, in fact, who had seen her star at its rising were never to see her again.

XIII

THE PESTILENCE (1665-1666)

BUBONIC plague had settled upon London. It had first been noticed in December of the previous year, but five months went by before it had become grave enough for Pepys to make mention of it in his diary. Seven weeks after the production of *The Indian Emperor* he wrote: "To the Coffee-house, where all the news is of the Dutch [ships] being gone out; and of the plague growing upon us in this town; and of remedies against it; some saying one thing and some another." Almost a year earlier he had heard at the coffee-house "great talk of the Dutch preparing sixty sail of ships. The plague," he adds, "grows mightily among them, both at sea and land." A few days beyond this he had also noted that "the plague increases at Amsterdam." We can therefore assume that the plague was brought into England by the sailors who had grappled successfully with the Dutch fleet off Lowestoft in 1664, and by those whom de Ruyter had repulsed, off the North Foreland, in 1665.

Drury Lane was one of the districts in which the plague first became really alarming. Not a day too early the Government decreed that the theatres must be shut. Nell and her new associates were therefore thrown out of work; and where she was or how she fared until they re-opened, long afterwards, we shall never find out. The players at the King's Theatre were technically among the King's servants, and presumably they would receive salaries from the Treasury during a national crisis. Some writers conjecture (including, I think, the uncensorious Dasent)

that Charles Hart took her away from London. It is even possible that they, and some of their fellow-players, may have tried their luck in the provinces. Be that as it may, here was a major incident of her experience, and any imaginative mind must wish that it were possible to realise the impressions which were made upon her as, week by week, the disease and the horror of it waxed and waned. This we are able to do, thanks once more to Samuel Pepys: and the difference between following the course of that calamity as he records it in his pages, where references to it are mixed up with a multitude of minor interests, and of reading a formal account of it, is comparable for excitement with the difference of having lived through the years of the European War, experiencing those day-to-day fluctuations of hope and dejection, and of sitting down, twenty years afterwards, to read a history of those appalling days in the reassuring knowledge of how they ended.

Most of us, living in the comfortable twentieth century, shudder when we hear of plague, and the horror of the Great Plague cannot possibly be over imagined. Nevertheless, it did at least not come altogether as a hideous surprise to the men and women of the seventeenth century. There had been lesser plagues within the memory of the old and elderly people whom Nell Gwyn met: for example, the epidemic of 1625. The infectiousness of the disease, however, the agony which attended it, the swiftness with which death almost inevitably ensued, and the impotence of medical science to fight with it, made the unhappy people who were alive in 1665 experience a long-drawn terror which we can but inadequately conceive.

Bubonic plague is a sub-tropical disease, due to a bacillus. The bacillus passes from a rat's flea to the rat, and from the rat to a human being, so that there

can be little doubt, if any, that the Great Plague in London is ultimately traceable to the fleas upon certain rats which were brought by some Dutch ship from one of the tropical Dutch colonies. The symptoms were plain, alarming and extremely painful. Spots, large or small, appeared on one or other part of the body, but particularly on the lips or eyelids. The patient developed a high fever; his kidneys became congested; and there was dilation of the heart and enlargement of the lymphatic glands. His pulse-rate became rapid. He shivered, became giddy, and suffered from frontal headaches, from nausea and from diarrhoea. Moreover, the attack was accompanied by mental feebleness and by a terror of impending death. It also caused the patient to "reel like a drunken man," and Treves goes so far as to say that "London during the Plague was like a drunken orgy"; the most macabre orgy that the world has ever seen.

The whole situation was made more dire by the fact that a person might have "pestis minor" and, although not himself going under or even suffering, might become an innocent carrier of infection. How easily the infection might be transmitted we understand when we learn that the mere breath of a victim or a speck of his sputum could convey it to another. Those who were stricken knew on the third day of their sickness that there was no hope for them. The bubo, or swelling, which was the most obvious symptom of the Plague, might appear on the neck, the arm-pit or the groin: and it was on the third day that the bubo showed itself. Rapidly increasing, it became the size of a hen's egg. In colour, the patient turned black or dark gray: and it was normal for death to end his agony on either the third day or the fifth.

The Plague ravaged London, and latterly some

other places, with increasing or diminishing fury, from the May of 1665 until the November of 1666, and throughout those terrifying months no one, we must remember, could foresee how long it would last or how far it would spread. Pepys had no choice but to remain in London. He was an official of some importance—Clerk of the Acts—in the Admiralty, and he had to stick to his duty. Very early in June (1665), on a day which he says was “the hottest that ever I felt in my life,” he was walking in Drury Lane when he noticed that a red cross had been chalked or painted on the doors of two or three houses. And the words, “Lord, have mercy upon us” were written across the closed doors, “which was a sad sight to me,” he says, “being the first of the kind that, to my remembrance, I ever saw.” It may have been the sight of these very doors, in her own neighbourhood, that caused Nell Gwyn, with Hart’s help, to seek refuge in the country. Three days later (June the 10th) poor Pepys had a grim shock. As he was sauntering home from Whitehall, where he worked, to Seething Lane, he heard that the Plague had crept into the City itself and, worse yet, that it had first appeared in the house of “my good friend and neighbour, Dr. Burnett, in Fenchurch Street.” This, the reader will recall, was only a stone’s throw from Pepys’s home. On the following day he went “out of doors a little, to show, forsooth, my new suit.” The pleasure of parading his new suit was very speedily dashed. Perhaps it was curiosity which caused him to go down Fenchurch Street. There he observed that Dr. Burnett’s door was shut, an unmistakable signal, and he reports that the unlucky doctor had “gained great goodwill among his neighbours” because he was himself the first to discover that he had caught the plague and had “caused himself to be shut up of his own accord; which was very handsome.”

By the 21st of June the disease had fastened upon Westminster, and people were pouring out of London as fast as they could, "the coaches and waggons being all full of people going into the country." Pepys now decided that although he would have to stay behind, he would send his wife away from London. He had, however, great difficulty in persuading his mother to move. A week later he noticed "several plague-houses in King Street and near the palace." A little later he began to wonder how long he would be fortunate enough to escape the infection—"the season growing so sickly," he says, "that it is much to be feared how a man can escape a share with others in it, for which the good Lord God bless me, or make me fitter to receive it."

On July the 5th he despatched bedding and other necessities to Woolwich in preparation for his wife's arrival there. And he must have been thankful when at length she, at least, was beyond the existing zone of danger; for he now saw that the Green Park was "quite locked up" and that in Pall Mall a certain house had been closed—a house where "in Cromwell's time, we young men used to keep our weekly clubs." Mrs. Pepys followed her paraphernalia to Woolwich, accompanied by two maids; and Samuel, with another of the maids, was alone, taking his chance. On the 6th he had an appointment with Lord Brouncker, one of his superiors at the Admiralty, and he was sorry that he could not keep it because "one of the two great houses within two doors" of Lord Brouncker's was "now shut."

Indeed, wherever he went, in the district of Long Lane and London Wall, he now saw houses that had been "visited." He heard, too, that "it is an unpleasant thing to be at Court, everybody being fearful one of another": a stray remark that will



SAMUEL PEPYS

John Hayls. National Portrait Gallery

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THE PESTILENCE

light up a thousand little pictures in any imaginative mind. However, he kept a stout heart, and on the 13th of July, having to make a night journey to Deptford on official business, he was unable to find a disengaged rowboat (rowboats were becoming scanty) and consequently embarked in one that "had a gentleman already in it, and he proved a man of love to music; and he and I sang together the way down with great pleasure." "Above seven hundred," he notes, "died of the plague this week," and the population of London was then a small fraction of what it has now become.

We cannot wonder if, five days later, he found very few people at the Exchange—hitherto a spot to which everyone who was concerned with finance resorted. He was shocked to learn there that the officials were now burying the dead in the open fields at Tothill. Only "such as are able to pay dear for it" could any longer enjoy the empty consolation of knowing that they would be buried in the Broadway Churchyard at Westminster. By the end of July "the sickness is scattered almost everywhere," and he adds that "it was all over King's Street, at the Axe, and next door to it, and in other places." His daily apprehension can be easily imagined, and he must have been grateful when a titled lady gave him "a bottle of plague-water"—probably quite ineffective—to take home. He began to be very gravely perturbed in his solitude at Seething Lane, and he sat up late on the 21st of July, arranging his papers, "the plague growing very raging, and my apprehensions of it great."

By the 22nd his old friend, Dr. Burnett, must have recovered—for a time. One of Burnett's men-servants, however, had died. The unlucky doctor was suspected of having killed him, presumably by making some medical experiment, but Burnett,

fortunately, was able to show Mr. Pepys "the acknowledgment of the master of the pest-house, that his servant died of a bubo on his right groin and two spots on his right thigh, which is the plague." Four days afterwards he reports that forty people had died on the previous night, "the bell always going." Moreover, "the sickness is got into our parish this week, and is got, indeed, everywhere; so that I begin to think of setting things in order, which I pray God enable me to put, both as to soul and body." During the last week of July between seventeen and eighteen hundred persons had suddenly perished; and although we cannot cease to smile at Mr. Pepys's frailties, we do him an injustice if we forget the resignation and the fortitude with which, even in the secrecy of his Diary, he confronted the invisible and loathsome enemy that was closing in upon him.

He now began to avoid the most perilous districts. "The streets empty all the way," he records, "even in London, which is a sad sight." He learned, too, that "poor Will, that used to serve us ale" (at the door of Westminster Hall), "his wife and three children died, all, I think, in a day." As he went home through the silence of the City he found himself "wishing I may have taken no ill in going; but I will go, I think, no more thither." The plague-list now became truly alarming. At the end of a week, on August the 10th, three thousand deaths were reported.

With a view to safeguarding the public from infection, the dead had been taken from their houses at night and immediately buried. On August the 15th Pepys was kept late at the Admiralty, and it was dark before he got home. As he landed at London Bridge a corpse was being carried "down a little pair of stairs" in a narrow alley: an encounter which

made him "beware of being late abroad again." On another occasion he had to ride to Brentford on business. It was a Sunday, and at Brentford he observed that there were "many Londoners" in church. Eventually, and with little stomach for it, he returned, not before it was "very dark," to Queenhithe, the nearest landing-place to which the waterman had courage to take him. "Thence," he says, "with a lantern, in great fear of meeting dead corpses, carrying to be buried; but, blessed be God! met none, but did see now and then a link, which is the mark of them, at a distance." On the 25th he found that Dr. Burnett had died that morning—a forgotten martyr to science, it seems, for a contemporary letter states that he succumbed within a few hours of "opening a dead corpse which was full of the tokens." In spite of everything—and many people must have felt that the end of the world was drawing near—Mr. Pepys remained faithful to his Diary, and on August the 26th he made the following unaffected and pathetic entry: "So home, sooner than ordinary, and, after supper, to read melancholy alone, and then to bed."

London was still emptying itself of the living. Pepys, after staying indoors for a few days, again noticed how few people were about in the streets, "and those," he adds, "looking like people that had taken leave of the world." At last he decided, owing no doubt to a slackening of business, to leave London and to join his wife at Woolwich: but if he did so, where could he secrete his hard-earned money? After some thought he "resolved to venture it in an iron chest, at least for a while." By the end of August, in fact, the death-list had mounted from three thousand to six thousand a week. So the authorities declared; but Pepys conjectured that the true number was about ten thousand. The official re-

turns, he says, were inexact, "partly from the poor that cannot be taken notice of, and partly from the Quakers and others that will not have any bell ring for them."

At Woolwich he was impanelled on an emergency committee which had been formed in order to deal with the plight of refugees. That, perhaps, is why he wanted to look his best. On September the 3rd he donned his new periwig, "bought," he remarks, "a good while since, but durst not wear, because the plague was in Westminster when I bought it; and it is a wonder," he continued, "what will be the fashion after the plague is done, as to periwigs, for nobody will dare to buy any hair, for fear of the infection, that it had been cut off the heads of people dead of the plague." He gives, too, a remarkable instance of the morbid curiosity which impels the populace to associate itself with any incident that can stir a strong or a crude emotion. The people had been forbidden to go near a plague-corpse but they continued to do so, coming "in crowds along with the dead corpses to see them buried." And then he relates a story, connected with his committee work, which has justly become famous for its beauty. One of his colleagues, an alderman named Hooker, brought to the notice of the Commission a peculiar case. Someone had complained that, against the regulations, a certain man had transferred a child from an infected London house to the haven of Greenwich. What were they to do? The house in question belonged to a saddler who was "a very able citizen." It was in one of the most plague-stricken parts—Gracechurch Street. The saddler's household had been appallingly "visited" by the plague, for he had buried "all the rest of his children." The alderman reported that "himself, and wife, now being shut up in despair of escaping, did desire only

to save the life of this little child (their last), and so prevailed to have it received stark-naked into the arms of a friend, who brought it, having put it into new fresh clothes, to Greenwich." This was a tale, we may think, to move a heart less compassionate than the heart of Samuel Pepys, and it is pleasant, even at this long distance of time, to know that he and his fellow commissioners over-ruled the complaint and permitted the child "to be received and kept in the town."

In order to pack his necessities he went back to London by water. This was on the 6th of September. "Strange," he comments, "to see in broad daylight two or three burials upon the Bankside, one at the very heels of another: doubtless, all of the plague; and yet at least forty or fifty people going along with every one of them." The significance of this entry lies, of course, in the fact that burials were now effected in the daytime, owing to pressure of work. Even the official death-list for this week had risen to nearly seven thousand; and this, in spite of the continual exodus from London. A reader of the Diary almost sighs with relief when he hears that on September the 8th, at one in the morning, Mr. Pepys, having "wrapped himself warm," got back to Woolwich. A little later, when business took him again to the City, he was thankful to find that his "plate and treasure" were safe: but wherever he went "the sickness" pursued him. In Fenchurch Street he passed a number of corpses, and at noon. In Gracechurch Street a sick person "in a hackney coach" went by him, journeying, one supposes, to the pest-house. He was considerably perturbed to find "the Angel Tavern shut up; and more than that, the ale-house at the Tower Stairs; and more than that, that the person was then dying of the plague when I was last there, a little while ago, at night."

The grim news was everywhere. He heard that "poor Payne, my waiter, hath buried a child, and is dying himself"; that a labourer whom he had recently employed to run an errand was now dead; that "one of my own watermen that carried me daily, fell sick as soon as he had landed me on Friday morning last, when I had been all night on the water"; and "lastly, that both my servants have lost their fathers of the plague this week." Little wonder if he was "in great apprehension of melancholy." It was dangerous even to go back to Woolwich in the clothes in which he had set out; and every "heat-bump" or local irritation of the skin must have made him fear that the plague had found him. However, "I put off my thoughts of sadness as much as I can," he wrote, "and the rather to keep my wife in good heart, and family also." As an Admiralty official he was bothered by a peculiar situation. Sailors from incoming ships would go ashore, and some of them would fall sick; but even when they had recovered the captains of their ships would not take them on board again. The wretched men, says Pepys, lay all night and all day in front of his office doors. There was one ray of light in his melancholy: the death-list on September the 27th had gone down by eighteen hundred. He did not know it, but the very worst was already over.

Nevertheless, the sickness, particularly in the neighbourhood of the Tower, was still raging fiercely throughout October. "I walked," says Pepys, "to the Tower; but Lord! how empty the streets are, and melancholy, so many poor sick people in the streets, full of sores; and so many sad stories overheard as I walk, everybody talking of this [man] dead and that man sick, and so many in this place, so many in that. And they tell me in Westminster there is never a physician and but one apothecary

left, all being dead; but that there is great hopes of a great decrease this week; God send it!"

Late in November a severe frost made everyone hope "for a perfect cure of the plague," and indeed the number of deaths in a certain week, at this time, had fallen to six hundred. Mr. Pepys, buying two barrels of oysters in Gracechurch Street, was obviously surprised to find that "the fine woman of the shop" was still alive. A few days later he once more ventured, but with much trepidation, to hire a hackney-coach; and remembering the sick person whom he had seen in one of these vehicles he cannot have relished the drive. At the back of his thoughts, too, lurked the married man's perpetual worry about expenses. Mrs. Pepys and her three maids were at Woolwich; Samuel, with his Admiralty clerks, was now at Greenwich; and in Seething Lane another maid was installed as caretaker.

Early in January, 1666, the disaster seemed to be almost ended. The mortality bill for a week stood at a mere seventy. No doubt the cold weather had proved to be a better medicine than any phial of "plague-water." Even a nobleman now came back to London. Less exalted persons had been returning in considerable numbers, and Pepys rightly dreaded the consequences. None the less, he could not help being delighted "to see the town full of people again, and the shops beginning to open." The City, he noted, was "almost as full again of people as ever it was," but the Covent Garden district remained empty. For a week or two, just as he had foreseen, the number of deaths increased, but the increase was temporary. By the end of January the number had dropped again, this time to fifty-six. In February the King returned to Whitehall. Mr. Pepys even decided that it ought to be safe at last to attend divine service in London. The huge mounds in the

churchyard, however, daunted him, and he made up his mind not to go through a churchyard again "for a good while."

The winter continued to do its curative work, and by the beginning of spring London, after enduring almost a year of gloom and horror, became practically clear of the disease. Mr. Pepys must have been thankful, partly for the sake of his purse, when he felt justified in bringing his wife to town again; and, having accompanied him through so many weeks of dread, a reader will be doubly charmed to learn that on May the 5th, "it being a fine moonshine, my wife and Mercer came into the garden and, my business being done, we sang till about twelve at night, with mighty pleasure to ourselves and neighbours, [to judge] by their casements opening." Even the hot days of summer had little effect upon worn-out London. The plague had swept away seventy-thousand persons, and perhaps there were few folk left whose constitutions could not withstand it.

Anyone can realise how incalculably all business must have been dislocated; and when, on June the 11th, De Ruyter with his Dutch ships came sailing up the Medway, silently and unopposed, he may have recognised that his triumph had been prepared by the rats which had infested another Dutch fleet eighteen months earlier.

In July, unfortunately, the pestilence was "raging mightily" in the country, and "particularly in Colchester, where it hath long been, and is believed will quite depopulate the place." Deptford, Greenwich and Chatham now also began to suffer severely; and instead of Londoners fleeing for refuge to these outlying towns, their own inhabitants began to crowd into London. They cannot have had a really cordial welcome. Still, at the end of August, Pepys heard what he might well have termed the best

news that ever he heard in his life. He encountered his old acquaintance, Orange Moll, and she told him that the King's Theatre had re-opened ten days before. The actors, therefore, and Nell Gwyn among them, were back in London, preparing for a winter season. Killigrew had not been idle. He had been busy in superintending the widening of the stage in his playhouse. It is clear, from internal evidence,* that the theatres had not yet been opened to the general public, and indeed, if they were open, Mr. Pepys would have been the last man to hear Orange Moll's announcement with surprise. Perhaps they had given some trial performances before a handful of the nobility. A week later all Killigrew's plans were violently checked, and Nell, in the midst of rehearsing a part in some little man-made comedy, had to witness a tremendous natural spectacle which reduced the world of stage-effects to utter insignificance.

* See page 77.

XIV

THE GREAT FIRE (1666)

AT three o'clock in the morning, on September the 2nd, multitudes of the lords and ladies, the men and women, who had recently come back from the country, were waked up by an apocalyptic glow on their bedroom casements: a red glare strong enough, we can be sure, to have penetrated even the curtains of their four-posters.* When they looked out, still bemused with sleep, they probably wondered if the end of the world had come, and half expected to hear the Last Trump and to see all the seventy thousand newly dead reassembling, loathsomely disfigured, in the streets below.

The Great Fire had begun. It was destined to ravage four hundred streets, to consume more than thirteen thousand houses, and to destroy St. Paul's, the Royal Exchange, the Customs House, Newgate Gaol, the greater part of the Guildhall and fifty-two of the Company Halls. In fact, five-sixths of the City was burnt down. Soon after daybreak one of Pepys's maids brought a rumour that three hundred houses had been burnt during the fag-end of the night. The wind-blown forests and wildernesses of flame spread, hither and thither, for four days and nights, and so rapid and terrifying was the destruction which they

* I speak from a recollection of the inexplicable red light that suffused a Kensington studio, in which I was living, on a night in 1916, when for the first time an English airman brought down a Zeppelin in flames. The frightful affair happened at a great distance—at Cuffley. The huge conflagration of 1666 was, relatively, next door to anyone who was sleeping in the City.

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scattered that the persons responsible for tackling the situation, not only got little or no sleep throughout that period, but also realised with panic that they could not demolish buildings quickly enough to arrest the wild onslaught of the fire.

In this deep quiet, from what source unknown,
Those seeds of fire their fatal birth disclose;
And first, few scattering sparks about were blown,
Big with the flames that to our ruin rose:

Then in some close-pent room it crept along,
And, smouldering as it went, in silence fed;
Till the infant monster, with devouring strong,
Walk'd boldly upright with exalted head. . . .

At length the crackling noise and dreadful blaze
Call'd up some waking lover to the sight;
And long it was ere he the rest could raise,
Whose heavy eyelids yet were full of night.

These were among the numbers which Dryden subsequently sang to his lyre. From Mr. Pepys, who was jotting down his impressions evening by evening, we learn that the "seeds of fire" were conceived, if I may enlarge Dryden's metaphor, at the house of the King's baker, in Pudding Lane. The poet proceeds to tell us that—

The next to danger, hot pursued by fate,
Half-cloth'd, half-naked, hastily retire:
And frighted mothers strike their breasts too late,
For helpless infants left amidst the fire.

Their cries soon waken all the dwellers near;
Now murmuring noises rise in every street:
The more remote run stumbling with their fear,
And, in the dark, men jostle as they meet. . . .

To this, Mr. Pepys, not writing for fame or for posterity, adds a graphic pen-picture: "everybody," he says, "endeavouring to remove their goods, and

flinging into the river: poor people staying in their houses as long as till the very fire touched them, and then running into boats, or clambering from one pair of stairs, by the waterside, to another. And among other things," he continues tenderly, "the poor pigeons, I perceive, were loath to leave their houses, but hovered about the windows and balconies, till they burned their wings and fell down." Dryden, who had not observed the pigeons, plucked his lyre to the following effect:

Now streets grow throng'd and busy as by day:
Some run for buckets to the hallowed quire:
Some cut the pipes, and some the engines play;
And some, more bold, mount ladders to the fire.

A quay of fire ran all along the shore,
And lighten'd all the river with a blaze:
The waken'd tides began again to roar,
And wondering fish in shining waters gaze. . . .

It was indeed, as Pepys considered, "a most horrid, malicious, bloody flame, not like the fine flame of an ordinary fire"—an ordinary fire meaning, perhaps, a fire in which we have only an impersonal interest. "The streets full," he says, "of nothing but people and horses and carts loaden with goods, ready to run over one another, and removing goods"—further on he refers to "good goods"—"from one burned house to another. They now removing out of Canning Street, which received goods in the morning, into Lombard Street, and farther." Moreover, without having thought of the wondering fishes, he described "the river full of lighters and boats taking in goods, and good goods swimming in the water." In one he observed a "pair of virginals."

The poet, taking up the story, relates how

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To every ~~corner~~ ^{corner} portion of the town
The ~~er~~ling billows roll their restless tide:
In parties now they struggle up and down,
As armies, unopposed, for prey divide.

He goes on to say that “now day appears, and with the day the King” whose “pious tears,” he assures us, caused “the wretched” to forget their own grief in contemplation of Charles’s. We know, from other authorities, that Charles gave a creditable example of energy, and actually took his place in a chain of bucket-passers, working strenuously and doubtless enjoying it all with the boyish bit of his nature. Pepys had brought him news of the calamity, and Charles had despatched him with a message to the Lord Mayor. For some time Pepys could not find the latter, but, he says, “At last met my Lord Mayor in Canning Street, like a man spent, with a handkercher about his neck. To the King’s message”—commanding him to pull down houses wherever necessary—“he cried, like a fainting woman, ‘Lord! what can I do? I am spent: people will not obey me. I *have* been pulling down houses; but the fire overtakes us faster than *we* can do it.’ ”

After a time the authorities—perhaps the Lord Mayor among them—decided to set a limit to the destruction by bringing down the dangerous buildings with gunpowder, and

The powder blows up all before the fire;
The amazed flames stand gathered on a heap;
And from the precipice’s brink retire,
Afraid to venture on so large a leap.

All, however, was vain, for

. . . hydra-like the fire
Lifts up his hundred heads to aim his way:
And scarce the wealthy can one half retire,
Before he rushes in to share his prey.

PRETTY WITTY NELL

The rich grow suppliant, and the poor grow proud:
Those offer mighty gain, and these ask more;
So void of pity is the ignoble crowd
When others' ruin may increase their store. . . .

Night came, but without darkness or repose . . .

and certainly without either to pacify Mr. Pepys: for at four in the morning he was up and about, putting his money, his plate, and his "best things" on a cart in the hope of transporting them to the house of a friend in Bethnal Green. No sooner was the property packed than he prudently set out with it, "riding myself," he informs us, "in my night-gown, in the cart." Again allowing the poet to chant, we learn that

Those who have homes, when home they do repair,
To a last lodging call their wandering friends;
Their short uneasy sleeps are broke with care,
To look how near their own destruction tends.

Those who have none, sit round where once it was,
And with full eyes each wonted room require;
Haunting the yet warm ashes of the place,
As murdered men walk where they did expire. . . .

The most in fields like herded beasts lie down,
To dews obnoxious on the grassy floor:
And while their babes in sleep their sorrows drown,
Sad parents watch the remnants of their store.

While by the motion of the flames they guess
What streets are burning now, and what are near . . .

At this point the accounts of the great and of the little man coincide; for Mr. Pepys, having "fed upon the remains of yesterday's dinner" because his household could not make a fire and had packed up all its dishes, went out and dug in his garden, and stowed away the wine and "my parmesan cheese": and found himself becoming more and

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more restless, "only now and then walking into the garden, and saw how horribly the sky looks, all on a fire in the night, was enough to put us out of our wits; and indeed it was extremely dreadful, for it looks just as if it was at us, and the whole heaven on fire." These, perhaps, are sentences remembered from a letter which he wrote to his father in the course of that harassed evening: for he found that "the post-house being burned, the letter could not go." Yet another day passed and another night without anyone being able to feel that the fire was in control, and again another day and another night, until

. . . four days the sun had seen our woes:

Four nights the moon beheld incessant fire:

It seemed as if the stars more sickly rose,

And farther from the feverish north retire,

to which Pepys, with more eye to detail than becomes a dignified poet, adds that, on the fourth day, he "did see a poor cat taken out of a hole in a chimney, with the hair all burned off the body, and yet alive."

Posterity will never be able to determine how long the vast conflagration might have persisted if it had been allowed to run a natural course: but it was prematurely checked, Dryden assures us, by the piety of Charles the Second, who "outwept a hermit and outprayed a saint." Indeed, though all historians appear to have overlooked the incident, Charles, we are informed, called upon God as the "guide of my youth in exile and distress," and heroically offered himself as a sacrifice for his people. So effective, fortunately, were these prayers, coming from Royalty, that

The Eternal heard, and from the heavenly quire

Chose out the cherub with the flaming sword;

And bade him swiftly drive the approaching fire

From where our naval magazines were stored,

an interposition which was notably disinterested, seeing that

The fugitive flames, chastised, went forth to prey
On pious structures by our fathers reared.

Indeed, we cannot be surprised that Charles was deeply affected by the decision of the cherub to offer up the churches in order to save the munition depot, and when we are misled into thinking of Charles as a frivolous agnostic we ought to remember that

With sober joy his heart and eyes abound:
To the All-good his lifted hands he folds,
And thanks Him low on his redeemed ground.

Poor Mr. Pepys, being ignorant of the effort which Charles had made, became so distracted that he "forgot almost the day of the week"; and everyone must rejoice with him when, nine days after the exhaustion of the fire, he made the entry: "So home, having this day also got my wine out of the ground again, and set it in my cellar; but with great pains to keep the porters that carried it from observing the money-chests there." Even three more days had to pass before he could really resume a normal life. Then, however, he was "up betimes, and shaved myself after a week's growth: but Lord!" he exclaims, "how ugly I was yesterday, and how fine to-day!"

When Dryden, concluding his retrospect of "the Astounding Year," says that

The utmost malice of their stars is past,
And two dire comets, which have scourged the town
In their own Plague and Fire have breathed their last,
Or dimly in their sinking sockets frown,

he was, as usual, speaking with more accuracy than is common among poets, for the plague had not

entirely vanished. Toward the end of November the churches held services of thanksgiving for its cessation after a spell of eighteen months, but Pepys considered that, so long as people were still dying of the plague, these services were premature. He believed, in fact, that the celebrations had been hastened in order "to get ground for plays to be publicly acted, which the Bishops would not suffer till the plague was over." Nevertheless, he was at least able to turn his attention to disasters of a more domestic order. On the day after he had shaved himself and looked fine he says that he is "troubled at my wife's hair coming off so much."

XV

WASTED BRILLIANCE (1666-1667)

SOME of the old puritans must have regarded the Plague and the Great Fire as obvious manifestations of God's wrath on account of the sexual depravity at Whitehall. They may even have considered that God had twice already expressed his opinion of the Restoration Drama. The actors resumed their wickedness, and with the minimum of delay. In the latter part of October they were again at work. Presumably, it was considered Bad Form to attend a theatre so soon after Charles's timely intercession had put a stop to the Fire. Otherwise Mr. Pepys would not have allowed another six weeks to go past before he gave in to his passion for the drama: and even when he did succumb he felt more than a little guilty. On December the 6th his wife and his brother, who was a clergyman, "go out to see a play," Pepys (not without a struggle, we may be sure) staying behind. His brother changed into layman's attire, "but," says Samuel, "I am not to take notice that I know of my brother's going." When the playgoers returned, their account of the evening's entertainment was clearly too much for him. He had tried hard to do the Right Thing, but there is no gainsaying that a theatre is a theatre: and Pepys had not seen a play for close on two years. Accordingly, on the very next day he crept off to the King's House, and saw the last act of *The Maid's Tragedy*. It may well be that he missed the other four acts by reason of a struggle with his conscience. Who can say how long he paced round and round the playhouse, attempting not to go in? When at last

he had taken the plunge, he sat with his cloak obscuring his face . . . "in mighty pain lest I should be seen by anybody to be at a play." The Old Adam speedily triumphed. On the very next afternoon back he went to the King's Theatre.

This time (December the 8th) he witnessed a comedy by the Honourable James Howard—a brother-in-law of Dryden. The piece was called *The English Monsieur*, and with it Nell Gwyn came into her own. Howard's comedy is poor stuff: but it was, by intention, comedy; and although the management were obstinate in their efforts to exploit Nell as a tragic actress, the public knew better. There is none of the Restoration playwrights, except Shadwell, who does not show that he had a fine ear for prose-cadence. The dialogue of *The English Monsieur* is, by comparison with Dryden's comedy-dialogue, tame and lack-lustre, but it does at least come trippingly to the tongue. In consequence, Nell had here a fitter medium for her buoyant personality than she had found in *The Indian Emperor*, and there can be no doubt that Howard's comedy succeeded because Nell suffused it with her own vivacity and humour. Our old friend Pepys was present during "a good part of *The English Monsieur*," and considered it "a mighty pretty play, very witty and pleasant. And," he proceeds, "the women do very well; but above all, little Nelly, that I am mightily pleased with the play, and much with the House, more than ever I expected, and very fine women"—that is, of course, in the audience. He was still "in pain to be seen, and hid myself; but as God would have it, Sir John Chichy came, and sat just by me."

The prehensile Dasent has, like Jack Horner, picked out of this play the following lines in Nell's part:

This life of mine can last no longer than my beauty;
and though 'tis pleasant now,—I want nothing whilst

PRETTY WITTY NELL

I am Mr. Wellbred's mistress—yet, if his mind should change, I might e'en sell oranges for my living; and he not buy one of me to relieve me—

words which, at sixteen, she spoke in the theatre and, at seventeen, might have used in real life. At present Mr. Wellbred had not realised how attractive she was.

During the next seven months her life belonged intensively to the theatre. She was always either playing or rehearsing a part: for London at this time had a population not larger, perhaps, than the present population of Oslo,* and in consequence no play was expected to "run." There was, too, no newspaper criticism. The fate of a play was decided, usually at its first performance, by the gentlemen who were present, and that, of course, is why a cringing or swaggering epilogue was almost a necessity. If a play survived the first two or three performances it was put into the repertory of the company and revived at judicious intervals. The London theatres, in fact, were managed just as the theatres on the Continent, except for a few in Paris and Berlin, are managed now. The actors, therefore, worked strenuously and were never able to play their parts in a sleep-walking state of mind. If they were not broaching a new play, they were rehearsing another that was to follow it; and if they were not rehearsing a new play, they were refreshing their memories of an old one. Nell Gwyn, for instance, between December 1666 and the end of April 1667, played seven parts of which we have some record, and in all probability other parts of which we hear nothing. Moreover, her parts were always long, for

* I say this under correction from any more knowledgeable person, for I have not been able to find out the approximate population of London in the sixteen-sixties. My suggestion is frankly a guess.

at seventeen she was a leading lady at the King's Theatre and worked on an equality with Mary Knipp and Rebecca Marshall.

Antiquarians have traced her appearance in, altogether, about twenty plays. Plays, however, are the most perishable of literary commodities because, in order to succeed, they have to catch public attention instantly, and to do this they must, nearly always, rely upon a topical appeal. The playwright who aims at quick and continuous success must apprehend the imminent changes of public interest as sensitively as a newspaper editor, and keep his work as completely up-to-date as a fashionable woman her style in dress. Most plays, therefore, are as soon demoded as a dress-fashion of five or ten years ago, and only a fanatical enthusiast could find much interest in most of the plays that Nell Gwyn vitalised.

She appeared in five plays by Dryden. Apart from these, the best known of the other fifteen on our list are *Catiline's Conspiracy* (Ben Jonson); *A King and No King* (Beaumont and Fletcher); *Philaster, or Love-lies-a-bleeding* (Beaumont and Fletcher); and *The Mulberry Garden* (Sir Charles Sedley). At first thought it may seem that Nell was lucky in having so great a writer as Dryden to work for the theatre in which she was acting; but, although he tried his utmost (and that means much) to make full use of her personality, he and she were not truly well matched. There are very few English writers, and only one English playwright, whose genius has the span of Dryden's. Except for unhappy and short-lived Thomas Otway, Dryden alone, at this period, had the high seriousness and the literary power which are necessary to the composition of notable tragedies. He strove manfully to create a new heroic drama. The temper of the time, much more than his own

deficiency, doomed that part of his work to permanent burial in the vaults of England's literary museum. Over and over again Mr. Pepys regretfully, or even querulously, complains that Nell was quite ineffective in a serious part. The management ought to have known that she was entirely unsuited to play the majestic and high-flying part of Panthea in *A King and No King*. Pepys, as we shall see, could hardly tolerate her in *The Indian Emperor*; and we may assume that she was no better in the other of the two serious plays by Dryden—*The Conquest of Granada*—with which, four years later, she finished her acting-career.

The serious half of Dryden's work was, therefore, of no benefit to Nell Gwyn. He had determined, however, not only to be the principal tragic dramatist of his time, but also to prove that he could out-distance all competitors in the writing of witty and salacious comedy. He had gone so far, even, as to cultivate the society of Buckhurst and Sedley for the express purpose of tuning up his own conversation to the pitch of theirs. We have all had some experience of youthful groups in which there is an unwritten law that no man, on pain of ostracisation, shall ever say what he really feels or speak seriously about anything: groups in which it is more important to be amusing than to be humane. That was the attitude of this Restoration "Smart Set" which hovered round Buckhurst, Sedley, Etheredge and Rochester; and it was an attitude which prevented Dryden from becoming really first-rate alike in tragedy and comedy.

His genius was the most thoroughly masculine that our theatre can show between the ascendancy of Ben Jonson and the ascendancy of Sir Arthur Pinero. His work, like theirs, is notable for its powerful construction. Everything that he wrote is sinewy.

That is true even of the lyrics in his dramatic work. The lyrics are expertly articulated marionettes, not easy and lissom dancers like the lyrics of a dozen Elizabethans. He manipulates language as though he were twisting metal with masterful fingers. We feel, as with Jonson and Pinero, that he left as little as possible to chance or, less happily, to inspiration; and his work, again like that of Jonson and Pinero, lacks lightness, fragrance and sensibility. He obviously designed a firm framework, even for a lyric, and then filled it in with suitable phrases. There is never anything wayward in his work, nor can he often have been surprised by a phrase as it came to him. In the heroic tragedies his resounding couplets break magnificently upon the ear, but it is seldom that they express more than a generalised emotion. He had, in fact, all the equipment of a tragic dramatist (and this we can say of very few men) except genuine tragic feeling: a fatal exception. Or did he really possess it? Might he have revealed it if he had been born as a contemporary of Webster or of Ford? Was it, perhaps, the infatuated worship of wit, which was everywhere about him, that made Dryden so self-conscious that, like a brilliant undergraduate, he dared not write emotionally and, in consequence, pumped up a rhetorical pseudo-emotionalism that would pass with the wits precisely because it was insincere and did not humiliate them by causing them to feel? The age measured everything—or almost everything—in terms of “wit”; and genuine tragic writing, of which Dryden was perhaps capable, would have been a transgression of Good Form.

The worship of wit, again, reduced his comedy from the first to the second rank. The flippancy which was natural to Buckhurst and Sedley never comfortably fitted the much broader intellect of

Dryden. He was so determined to be as witty as the wittiest that he put himself to school with these clever and shallow young noblemen, and there is something both ridiculous and pathetic in his effort and his failure to emulate their style. According to Rochester—

Dryden in vain tried this nice way of wit,
For he to be a taring Blade thought fit,

and even the poet himself is represented (in *Satyr to his Muse*) as confessing that

I from that Fatal hour new hopes Pursu'd,
Set up for Wit and Aukwardly was lewd,
Drunk 'gainst my Stomach, 'gainst my Conscience
Swore.*

Dr. Johnson observed of Dryden that "there is reason to believe that his communication was rather useful than entertaining. He declares of himself that he was saturnine, and not one of those whose sprightly sayings diverted company; and one of his censurers makes him say:

Nor wine nor love could ever see me gay;
To writing bred, I know not what to say.

In place of the humour and humanity, the lovely mingling of romance and absurdity, which have kept *Twelfth Night* a living play, these men and women of the Restoration wanted a bright hard cynicism, epigrams, neatly turned phrases and scenes in which there should be no tenderness, no sympathy and no beauty. By chasing so exclusively after wit, the playwrights have sterilised their plays. They were ashamed of kindness. They could not laugh understandingly at the frailties of men and

* Both passages quoted by V. de Sola Pinto in *Sir Charles Sedley*.

women. In order to be smart they had to be devilish. The warm-heartedness of Nell Gwyn was wasted by the cruelty of their minds. They gave her no scope for what was best in her; and she triumphed as an actress by virtue of her high spirits only.

Dryden, for all his great gifts, could not write airily enough for Nell: but this was not all. Like Jonson and Pinero, he had to pay the price of his emphatic masculinity, and the price which he paid was an inability to understand women or to write, when it was dramatically required, in a feminine key. Rebecca Marshall, who played queens and other exalted rôles, must have been far better suited to his strong but imperfect genius.

At length even the management of the King's Theatre perceived that Nature had meant Nell to be a comic actress. Even the opinionated Sir Robert Howard eventually gave her an epilogue to speak in which she says to the audience—

I know you in your hearts
Hate serious plays, as I hate serious parts,*

and Dryden himself, in an epilogue which will receive more attention a little later, made her frankly declare—

I dye
Out of my Calling, in a Tragedy.

Did they really "hate serious plays"? Mr. Pepys had a taste for the tragical, but of course he was neither crude nor truly "smart"; and Sir Robert, as part manager of the King's Theatre, should have learned something about the taste of the public. He was probably right. The playgoing public could

* *The Great Favourite, or the Duke of Lerma.*

still relish the declamation of strongly wrought English, and that is why Dryden's heroic dramas brought him so great a reputation; but the public, on the whole, had become frivolous and weak-spirited. And that, in turn, is why at the Duke's Theatre *Romeo and Juliet* was provided, on occasions, with a happy ending. Lacy, in the epilogue to *The Old Troop*, wrote:

When Lacy, like a whining lover dies,
Though you hate Tragedies, 'twill wet your eyes.

Perhaps Frank Harris was right when he asserted that tragedy flourishes in an age of men, comedy in an age of women: for women are less reflective and more pleasure-greedy than men, and certainly women are more conspicuous in the social life of the Restoration epoch than they are in the Elizabethan age.

XVI

THE TRIUMPHANT COMEDIENNE (1667)

THE 23rd of January, 1667, no matter how cold, was a red-letter day for Samuel Pepys: and a red-letter day it would have been for any man among us if his luck had been ours. Early in the afternoon Mr. Pepys, Mrs. Pepys and Mercer, the servant-companion who had sung glees with them in the moonshine, set out for Drury Lane. Having given his womenfolk "a dish of meat, they having not dined", Pepys shepherded them into the King's Theatre. The play was *The Humourous Lieutenant*, and Samuel was right in thinking it very silly—"only," he remarks, "the Spirit in it that grows very tall, and then sinks to nothing, having two heads breeding upon one, and then Knipp's singing, did please us."

The outing would evidently have been disheartening if it had ended there: but just as he and his charges were about to leave the theatre Knipp and another actress named Mrs. Pierce providentially called them back. Mrs. Pepys had never approved of Knipp, as we know: and yet an opportunity of going behind the scenes was not to be missed. So "Knipp took us all in," writes Pepys appreciatively, "and brought to us Nelly, a most pretty woman, who acted the great part of Celia to-day very fine, and did it pretty well." (He may have meant that the part was very fine and Nell was fairly good in it: or should we believe that the excitement of meeting Nell had made him forget that he thought the play a silly one?) "I kissed her," he goes on triumphantly, "and so did my wife: and a mighty

pretty soul she is." One authority, with attractive innocence, opines that the kiss does much credit to Mrs. Pepys. A more experienced student of feminine tactics may judge that the intention of the kiss was to show that Samuel's had no personal significance. Mrs. Knipp was evidently in her most expansive mood, for she then took her party into a box, and from that privileged position they watched a dancing rehearsal for the morrow's play. "So away thence," noted the happy Samuel, "pleased with this sight also, and specially kissing of Nell."

The first-comers to a goldfield may be called lucky; but although, among the girls of the period, there was perhaps no cut-throat competition to get stage-work, it is significant that Nell Gwyn, at fifteen, had begun her career by playing a leading part and that now, in the play which Pepys had just seen, she, on the eve of her seventeenth birthday, had played the only feminine part in the piece. *The Humourous Lieutenant*, a pre-war play by Fletcher, was probably revived, as the patient Dasent observes, "as a stop-gap until Dryden's new tragi-comedy, in which Nell had the best comedy part she ever played, was ready." She was now a popular favourite, and, apparently, a favourite with the managerial triumvirate. Dryden, therefore, probably wrote the part of Florimel in *Secret Love, or the Maiden Queen* expressly to suit her personality. This would help to explain her tremendous success. Hitherto, she had always hit the target: now she hit the very middle of the gold. For saying this we have the evidence not only of Pepys's unqualified praise, but also of the fact that the play was frequently revived at short intervals.

Pepys, after luncheon, took his wife "to see *The Maiden Queen*, a new play of Dryden's, mightily commended for the regularity of it, and the strain



NELL GWYN

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Charles Richard Cammell, Esquire*

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and wit.”* True, the King, the Queen and the Duke of York were present, and their presence usually imparted a rosy tint to Samuel’s critical spectacles, but even had they not been there he would probably have felt that “the truth is, there is a comical part done by Nelly, which is Florimel, that I never can hope ever to see the like done again, by man or woman.” Nor could he leave it at that. So strong was his enthusiasm that he repeats himself and adds “so great a performance of a comical part was never, I believe, in the world before as Nell do this, both as a mad† girl, then most and best of all when she comes in like a young gallant; and had the motions and carriage of a spark the most that ever I saw any man have. It makes me, I confess, admire her.” Even allowing that the kiss had gone to his head (and who shall blame him?), Nell’s performance must have been brilliant and may have been particularly piquant if, as I suspect, this was one of the first occasions upon which a girl had played in the disguise of a man. Her triumph so “took the town” that soon afterwards many ladies masqueraded in men’s clothes at the Court itself. Moreover, although Nell had seen Charles before, this was probably the first time that Charles had seen Nell: and we, who look back from so far, experience an odd sensation when we realise that for the moment he did not recognise his destiny.

Charles had an exceedingly high opinion of *Secret Love*. Indeed, Dryden says that the King used to refer to it as “my play”—possibly because it had brought Nell Gwyn into his consciousness. In itself,

* “The strain and wit” is a phrase that seems not to have troubled Pepys’s editors. Perhaps, therefore, the meaning is clear to them. If it is, I petition the reader to disregard a busy-body suggestion that Pepys meant to write “the strain of wit.”

† He uses the word in the sense of “mad-cap.”

the play has considerable interest for anyone who is happy enough to feel an irrational affection for the girl-actress who first played "Florimel." Her triumph was the more notable because she was playing against the strongest cast which Killigrew could provide. There was Rebecca—"the younger Marshall"—as Queen of Sicily; Mary Knipp, as the Queen's confidante; Hart, as a courtier; and Mohun, as the Queen's favourite. At one point Hart, flirting with Nell at a time when she is wearing a mask, guesses at the features behind it; and for once, and with regret, I must differ from the judicious Dasent who believes that the description is supposed to be the opposite of the truth. The speech runs:

A turn'd up Nose, that gives an air to your face: oh,
I find I am more and more in love with you! A full
neather-lip, an out-mouth,* that makes mine water at
it: the bottom of your cheeks a little blub, and two
dimples when you smile: for your stature, 'tis well; and
for your wit, 'twas given you by one that knew it had
been thrown away upon an ill face,

and inasmuch as this might be a transcription in words of Lely's portrait, I admit to suspecting that Dryden could not resist the temptation of delineating his merry little friend. As for her own part, it is so tellingly phrased that at times we can almost see and hear her; for instance, in the lines, spoken when she is in man's costume—

If cloathes and a *bon meen* will take 'em, I shall do't.—
[*Pretending to address herself*] Save you, Monsieur Florimel: Faith, me thinks you are a very *janty* fellow, poudré and ajusté as well as the best of 'em.—I can manage the little Comb—set my Hat, shake my Garniture, toss about my empty Noddle, walk with a courant slurr, and at every step peck down my Head,

* Perhaps a pouting mouth?

and again, in these, when she is once more attired as a girl:

Away with your old commonplace Wit: I am resolved to grow fat and look young till forty, and then slip out of the world with the first Wrinkle and the reputation of five and twenty.

It is strange that the benign Dasent expresses no regret that a girl who was not quite seventeen should have had to say:

An old Mistress, or Servant,* is an old Tune, the pleasure on't is past, when we have once learnt it.

At the close of the play Nell, attired as a jaunty fellow, poudré and ajusté, danced a jig that roused the audience, with the exception of one person, to the wildest enthusiasm. That one person was the King himself. The last scene of the play had put him out of humour. It is a scene of great interest to a student of English drama because it is manifestly the pattern upon which Congreve wrote the most celebrated passage in the most brilliant of all our comedies—*The Way of the World*. The theme of it—a marriage-bargaining dialogue—was, in fact, so clearly a theatrical inspiration that Dryden himself, in *Marriage à la Mode*, tried another variation upon it. In *Secret Love* it runs, spoken by Hart and Nell:

HART: When I have been at play, you shall never ask me what money I have lost.

NELL: When I have been abroad, you shall never inquire who treated me.

HART: Item, I will have liberty to sleep all night without your interrupting my repose for any evil design whatsoever.

* The word in this context means, of course, a "beau"—the male complement of a "mistress."

PRETTY WITTY NELL

NELL: Item, then you shall bid me good-night before you sleep.*

HART: Provided always that whatever liberties we take with other people, we continue honest to one another.

NELL: As far as will consist with a pleasant life.

Charles the Second was scandalised by this flippant treatment of marriage, an attitude which becomes comprehensible only when we discover that he objected to it on the ground that the Queen ought not to be required to listen to such levity. His disapproval, however, must have occasioned a prompt and serious committee meeting of Killigrew, Dryden and Sir Robert.

Even now the troubles of the management were not over. In April 1667 King Charles was much more bitterly annoyed; and the incident had, obliquely, a dramatic effect upon Nell's life. On the 15th of April Mr. Pepys walked into the King's Theatre at a venture and found a new play in progress. The house, he says, was "so full as I never saw it," and he was compelled "to stand all the while close to the very door till I took cold." It was much, though, to observe that the King, the Queen, the Duke and all the Court were present. The play was *The Change of Crowns* by Edward Howard; and seeing that Pepys considered it, after all his playgoing experience, "the best that ever I saw at that house, being a great play and serious," we should have cause for regretting its complete disappearance,† if we did not suspect that the presence of Royalty in full force may have unduly excited Mr. Pepys. Lacy, he tells us—and here we

* At the risk of pointing out what may be obvious, I submit that this and the preceding sentence have no value unless we imagine that the speakers imparted to them a sexual innuendo.

† Apparently it was not even printed.

are on the scent of the trouble—"did act the country gentleman come up to Court, who do abuse the Court with all imaginable wit and plainness about the selling of places, and doing everything for money."

On the following day, hoping to see this great work without the accompaniment of a draught from the playhouse door, he was astonished to find that the play had been withdrawn at once. Mrs. Knipp then explained to him that "the King was so angry at the liberty taken by Lacy's part to abuse him to his face, that he commanded they should act no more." In this predicament Mohun, acting as Killigrew's envoy-in-extraordinary, "went and got leave for them to act again," reported Mrs. Knipp, "but not this play. The King mighty angry; and it was bitter indeed, but very fine and witty."

Lacy was "committed to the porter's lodge," where he brooded over his injury: as well he might, seeing that the author of the play was obviously the person who should have been punished. Edward Howard, though, was a gentleman, and Lacy merely an actor and a "King's Servant." He was not kept in durance for long, and Howard, when he came out of it, congratulated him upon his release. This was too much for poor Lacy, who, losing his temper, exclaimed, quite justly, that "it was the fault of the nonsensical play" that he had got into all this trouble. Howard made some reply which exasperated the actor into telling him that he was more of a fool than a poet. No gentleman could put up with that from a player. Howard, using a glove, slapped Lacy's face. Lacy saw red and instantly gave Howard a crack on the head with his cane. Everyone was amazed, and most people disgusted, that Howard, who was related to the nobility, did not whip out his sword and run it through Lacy's

body. Perhaps he was gentleman enough to recognise that the actor had a true grievance. Be that as it may, he merely reported the affair to Charles; and Charles, thinking (as Pepys did) that these actors were getting above themselves, ordered that the King's Theatre should be closed—apparently, for two weeks. When it re-opened, the management, seizing the opportunity of profiting by Lacy's publicity, presented him in a clown's part: "but here," wrote Pepys, "was neither Hart, Nell nor Knipp; therefore the play was not likely to please me."

This was on May Day; and Pepys had a special reason for his disappointment in not seeing Nell on the stage that afternoon. May Day was then a true national festival, celebrated more joyously than by processions of socialists and miscellaneous agitators; and on that self-same morning Mr. Pepys had been lucky enough to witness a scene of uncommon charm. "To Westminster," he wrote, "in the way, meeting many milkmaids with their garlands upon their pails, dancing with a fiddler before them; and saw pretty Nelly standing at her lodgings' door in Drury Lane in her smock sleeves and bodice, looking upon them;* she seemed a mighty pretty creature." By this time—she was now seventeen—he was not the most exalted person who thought so. It may well have been during the previous fortnight, when, on account of Lacy's offence, she had been free from her stage work, that a very high personage—a lord, a wit and an arbiter of fashion—began to cultivate her society in earnest. If Hart was still fond of her, as seems likely, he may have noticed how much attention this rich young lord was paying her: and

* The phrase in the text of the Diary is "looking upon one." If there is sense in it, I apologise to the reader for suggesting an alternative word.

it is possible that Hart was not acting at the theatre that afternoon because he had been in no condition for the memorising of a new part.

Charles Sackville (Lord Buckhurst) is said, traditionally, to have concentrated his roving sex-interest upon Nell Gwyn when he saw her in a silly farce, by James Howard, called *All Mistaken, or The Mad Couple*. It was "probably" produced in April 1667; and, not being able to find a copy, I avail myself of a nutshell account of it which comes from the argus-eyed Dasent. He tells us that Nell created the part of "Mirida, a mad-cap girl . . . who is persecuted with the advances of a lean and a fat lover." She "declares that she will marry the thin one when he is fatter or perhaps the fat one when he is thinner. . . . The fat man," who is tied up, "rolls toward her" while "she rolls away from him, until, rising with a merry laugh, she seizes a couple of swords from a passing cutler, disarms her fat admirer, and holds him up to the ridicule of the audience." In the course of this imbecile scene Nell exposed, they say, "a liberal amount of her anatomy," and the sight of it was too pretty for Lord Buckhurst's power of resistance.

Not three months after this odd performance, Mr. Pepys, on July the 13th, had news from Mary Knipp that "troubled" him: news, in fact, that "my Lord Buckhurst hath got Nell away from the King's House, and gives her £100 a-year, so as she hath sent her parts to the house, and will act no more." The last words give the key to Samuel's reaction. He cannot have been surprised that a nobleman had appropriated Nell. Noblemen regarded the theatre as a pudding in which the actresses were delicious plums. Mr. Pepys was not troubled about the morality of the affair but only because, as he naturally supposed, he would never see her acting

again. He writes very differently when Frances Davenport, one of Nell's colleagues, went away with another nobleman, for he confided to his Diary that it was of no importance, "she being a bad player."

Nell, we must note, had returned her play-scripts to the management. This proves that, although she never learned to write except with great difficulty, she had learned, at some time, to read. All the evidence of the age precludes us from supposing that she had been taught to read in her hand-to-mouth childhood, and it is probable, therefore, that she struggled with the alphabet in order to qualify for promotion from the pit to the stage. Again, the entry in Pepys's Diary suggests that a leading actress would expect to make less in the theatre than £100 a year: and, seeing that Killigrew told Pepys, at another time, that the management had decided to give Mrs. Knipp an additional £30 a year, because she was "a great player," we may hazard that a famous actress did not make more than a parlourmaid (in England) can earn to-day.

XVII

HER LOVER, LORD BUCKHURST (1667)

NOBODY can gainsay that the rakes of the Restoration were rakish beyond all common measure; but we mis-imagine history if we think that all of them were merely reckless, unscrupulous and unintelligent cads who abused their social advantages. Even Rochester, the most offensive of the group, had wit and at times—by no means always—wrote skilful verse. In his youth he had promised well and “was naturally modest, till the Court corrupted him. . . . He gave himself up to all sorts of extravagance, and to the wildest frolics that a wanton wit could devise. . . . He would have gone about the streets as a beggar and made love as a porter. He set up a stage as an Italian mountebank. He was for some years always drunk and was ever doing some mischief.”* Etheredge—who was nicknamed both Easy Etheredge and Gentle George—has the credit, however unpleasant his vices, of having written a play—*The Comical Revenge, or Love in a Tub*—which is not only one of the best in its period, but also blazed a trail for Congreve. Sir Charles Sedley was, perhaps, the ring-leader of the rakes and the principal corrupter of youth; but the brilliance of his brain would have incommoded the aristocratic circles of most subsequent periods. Heavy-handed Shadwell has to admit that Sedley spoke “more wit at a supper than all my adversaries with their heads joined together can write in a year”; and a much finer critic of wit and

* Bishop Burnet. Quoted by V. de Sola Pinto.

intellectual ability—Charles the Second—told Sedley, one day, that “Nature had given him a Patent to be Apollo’s Viceroy.”*

As for Buckhurst, who was now on the point of making Nell Gwyn his mistress, he was beyond question the most able and the most attractive of these four friends. Everyone, in the days when he is joyously exploring the variegated empire of English literature, becomes early acquainted with a gallant and rollicking song, “written at sea, in the First Dutch War, the night before an Engagement.”† It begins with the stanzas:

To all you ladies now at land
 We men at sea indite;
 But first would have you understand
 How hard it is to write:
 The Muses now, and Neptune too,
 We must implore to write to you—
 With a fa, la, la, la, la.

For though the Muses should prove kind
 And fill our empty brain,
 Yet if rough Neptune rouse the wind
 To wave the azure main,
 Our paper, pen, and ink, and we,
 Roll up and down our ships at sea—
 With a fa, la, la, la, la. . . .

And the author, whose name is usually given as the Earl of Dorset, was the man whom Nell first knew as Lord Buckhurst.

The evidence for his ability and attractiveness is overwhelming. To him Dryden dedicated several poems, and Etheredge his masterpiece, *The Comical Revenge*. The great Duke of Buckingham would not

* Quoted by V. de Sola Pinto.

† Modern scholars appear to have proved that it was written at no such exciting time.

publish *The Rehearsal* until he had made sure that Buckhurst approved it. Again, it was Buckhurst who made Samuel Butler's *Hudibras* a fashionable book at Court, succeeding so well, in fact, that for a long period *Hudibras* was Charles the Second's favourite book and constant pocket-companion. Yet again, it was Buckhurst who ensured the success of young Wycherley's play, *The Plain Dealer*: and, much more significant than any of these items, particularly when we remember that he was, to outward seeming, a rich and spritely man of birth and fashion, Buckhurst, it appears, was the first man who recognised the greatness of *Paradise Lost*. Moreover, he received the highest possible tribute to his witty conversation. Congreve, the master-wit, not only wrote that

For pointed satire I would Buckhurst chuse,
The best good man, with the worst-natured Muse,

but subsequently, getting to know him only when he was old, reports that Buckhurst, even when dying, "slabbered more wit than most men do when in the best of health." He is praised in another aspect by Horace Walpole, who termed him "the finest gentleman in the voluptuous Court of Charles the Second": and Bishop Burnet had already described him as "a generous, good-natured and modest man . . . so much oppressed with phlegm that till he was a little heated with wine he scarce ever spoke, but was upon that exaltation a very lively man. Never was so much ill-nature in a pen as his, joined with so much good-nature as is in himself, even to success [?excess]. . . . He is bountiful to run himself into difficulties, and charitable to a fault, for he commonly gives all he has about him, when he meets an object that moves him."* His charitable disposition is attested by the

* Quoted by V. de Sola Pinto.

fact that he sent Matthew Pryor to Cambridge as an undergraduate: and of his liberality one of Nell Gwyn's earliest biographers, Peter Cunningham, writing in 1852, says that "his table was one of the last that gave us an example of the old house-keeping of an English nobleman. A freedom reigned about it which made every one of his guests think himself at home, and an abundance which showed that the master's hospitality extended to many more than those who had the honour to sit at table with himself."

A true mid-Victorian, if he had not censured Nell's cordial acceptance of Lord Buckhurst's irregular proposal, might have pitied her as a child of seventeen who was about to be led astray by a nobleman of twenty-nine: but we can be quite confident that Nell Gwyn would have counselled such a mid-Victorian to choke back his tears. Without question, she was cock-a-hoop over her capture and about her prospects. She must have been more than delighted; she must have been dazzled too; and we are justified in imagining that she hurried round with the exciting news to Rose Gwyn and the highwayman. Her mother, no doubt, foresaw an endless procession of brimmed glasses. And even those of us who have brought over from the past a few moral preferences into an age of laxity must admit that in manners, taste and the understanding of the male mind Nell would inevitably learn much from intimacy with a man of high breeding and culture. Few women are so sluggish as not to possess the feminine faculty of adaptation to an increasingly luxurious level of life; and although Nell Gwyn's personality was of fixed and definite kind, she had shown already an uncommon aptitude for self-education. She had emerged from serving drinks in a brothel to selling fruit in a theatre, and from selling fruit to playing

important parts, and had evidently found no difficulty in mixing on an equality with the world of the playhouse. Now—partly trained by the visitors to her dressing-room at the King's House—she assimilated just as easily the still more elegant style and the richer standards of the nobility. Lord Buckhurst, though he did not know it, was educating her for a gentleman of even greater importance: and one who, it seems (though no one has mentioned or, perhaps, discovered it), was responsible for her early death.

XVIII

A MERRY HOUSEHOLD AT EPSOM (1667)

BUCKHURST had decided that he and Nell should spend their unofficial honeymoon at Epsom. He had also decided, rather oddly, that his inseparable companion, Sir Charles Sedley, should accompany them. Perhaps he was not sure that Nell could adequately amuse him during the long summer days. When she heard that Sedley was to be with him Nell must have "screwed up her eyes until they could hardly be seen"—a mannerism which she had when she was much amused. Only four years earlier all London had been scandalised or entertained by an extraordinary prank on the part of these two friends and another. Nell would certainly have heard of it, not without laughter, since the incident occurred within a few hundred yards of her lodging.

Historians with a puritan bias have made far too much of the sad business; and Sedley's biographer is justified in claiming that Sir Charles ought not to be remembered, as he usually is, by nothing but this foolish and somewhat disgusting episode of his youth. On an evening in the middle of June, 1663, Sedley, Buckhurst and Sir Thomas Ogle, "Knight, of Pinchbeck, Lincolnshire,"* had been dining and wining with enthusiasm at the Cock Tavern in Bow Street, Covent Garden. The evening was manifestly very hot. In those days it was a common practice for men who were drinking hard to divest themselves of their outer clothing; but the three friends, having arrived

* Mr. de Sola Pinto adds that Sir Thomas was "destined to become a highly respectable Governor of Chelsea College, where he died in 1702."



LORD BUCKHURST (EARL OF DORSET)

Studio of Sir Godfrey Kneller. National Portrait Gallery. He is here much older than at the time of the Epsom affair

at the stage of intoxication in which a man gets out of touch with the world around him, stripped themselves stark-naked and stepped through an open window on to the balcony of the tavern. The sight of three naked men on a balcony quickly collected an ever-increasing crowd of citizens, apprentices and their womenfolk. Sedley, to whom the faces in the street below had no more significance than a herd of staring cows, began by "performing certain disgusting pranks," and then, becoming (as Etheredge put it) "rhetorically drunk," proceeded to improvise a mock sermon, "probably in ribald imitation of a Puritan divine." While he was preaching, Bow Street became packed with incredulous listeners. They are said to have numbered more than a thousand, and "little Sid," excited by this vast audience and particularly, we may suspect, by a blurred vision of petticoats, then harangued the crowd in the manner of a quack-doctor, expounding in particular the marvellous properties of "such a powder as should make all the women of the town run after him." The crowd, recovering from its astonishment, and being outraged by the lewdness of his oration, now snatched up any loose cobbles upon which they could lay their hands and began to pelt the three naked figures. They, nothing daunted and made truculent by drink, hastily retired to collect the empty bottles which remained from the feast, filled them with a liquid provided by nature, stepped out again on to the balcony and chucked the bottles into the infuriated mob. Everybody was now shouting or screaming. The uproar attracted more and more passers-by, each new-comer struggling to get a closer view of the remarkable picture on the balcony of the Cock. Eventually, the crowd threw such a multitude of stones at Sedley and his two associates that they, finding themselves in danger and their

ammunition exhausted, withdrew into the tavern. The mob had, finally, to content itself with smashing the windows. Nothing connected with this celebrated scandal is more agreeable than a sly phrase in a very early book about Sedley, to wit: "He appeared much in Publick about the Year 1663."

For this little "frolic" Sir Charles was fined two thousand marks and imprisoned for a week, the Judge "calling him 'sirrah' many times." Ogle seems to have emerged from it scot-free, nor was any punishment administered to Buckhurst. The Judge, however, hearing that he was present at Sedley's trial, asked "if it was that Buckhurst who was lately charged with robbery": for two years earlier, in 1661, Buckhurst and others had robbed and "mortally wounded an innocent tanner near Waltham's Cross." It is only fair to Buckhurst that we should realise that he and his friends had mistaken their victim for a robber.*

Remembering Sedley's escapade, which had happened only four years ago, Nell must have wondered if she would see anything like it at Epsom. She cannot have been sorry to leave her stuffy lodgings at the Cock and Pie, in Drury Lane, especially as the July days were as hot as they should be. She was really excited. This would be her first experience of an aristocratic setting; and, seeing that Buckhurst had offered her a definite yearly pension, she had reason to suppose that he was genuinely enamoured of her, as indeed he may have been. The understanding between them must have been serious or she would not have sent back her parts to the theatre. She assumed, as Pepys did, that her acting career was finished; and she was not sorry. No girl at this period thought of herself as primarily an

* This account of the Bow Street episode is based upon Mr. de Sola Pinto's *Sir Charles Sedley*.

artist. Acting, for a woman, was admittedly a half-way house toward profitable concubinage: a fact which caused innumerable Englishmen to abominate the theatre for the next two hundred years. Even at this time there were, of course, virtuous women, and not solely in country places. There was one at least—a lily in the mud—at the Court: Frances Stewart, the one woman, so far as we know, who resisted every blandishment or mockery of King Charles. There was also one at least in the very world of the theatre—Mrs. Betterton of the Duke's House. "With this single exception," wrote Cunningham, "there was not, I believe, an actress at either theatre who had not been or was not then the mistress of some person about the Court. Actors," he added, "were looked upon as little better than shopmen or servants." Nell, therefore, regarded her alliance with Buckhurst as an advance which was normal to her profession and only remarkable in its degree. Any actress, except Mrs. Betterton, would have run to the beck of this particular young lord.

When they arrived at Epsom they put up at a small house next door to the King's Head Inn: a surprisingly small house for so rich a man as Buckhurst to have chosen. It is familiar to everyone who has ever visited Epsom, for it stands in the market-place and is now a tea-shop that goes by the name of "Nell Gwynne's Old House." Time, unhappily, has altered it so much that Nell, if she could return to us, would recognise only the bay-windows of two upper rooms which overlook the street. The one was the window of her bedroom, the other of her sitting-room, and even they, in her time, would have been latticed windows. Still, it is easy to imagine the gabled and timbered houses that lined the market-square; the seventeenth-century appearance of the King's Head; and the straggling houses that made

up the town. Horse-races had been run on the Downs for about fifty years, but very infrequently—Newmarket being in Nell's time the principal racing town—and Epsom, ever since the discovery of a mineral spring in 1618, had been growing in favour as a fashionable spa. "Your glass-coach,"* wrote the unlucky Shadwell, "will to Hyde Park for air; the suburb fools trudge to Lamb's Conduit or Tottenham; your sprucer sort of citizens gallop to Epsom."

Oddly enough, Mr. Pepys, who aspired so earnestly to be fashionable, had decided to take his wife there at the very same time. So great was the prestige of the spa that, a fortnight earlier, Mrs. Pepys, "poor wretch, was contented to stay at home, on condition to go to Epsom next Sunday." They arrived on July the 14th. Pepys had risen at four o'clock and "stayed talking below [with another lady who was making the journey] while my wife dressed herself, which vexed me that she was so long about it, keeping us till past five o'clock before she was ready. She ready," he continues, and we can almost hear the impatience in his voice, "she ready, and taking some bottles of wine, and beer, and some cold fowl with us into the coach, we took coach and four horses, which I had provided last night, and so away. A very fine day, and so towards Epsom, talking all the way pleasantly. The country very fine, only the way very dusty. To Epsom by eight o'clock, to the Well; where much company, and I drank the water: they [his companions] did not, but I did drink four pints. And to the town, to the King's Head; and hear that my Lord Buckhurst and Nelly are lodged at the next house, and Sir Charles

* Many coaches, and probably all the hackney-carriages, had horn windows.

Sedley with them; and keep merry house. Poor girl! I pity her; but more the loss of her at the King's House."

Buckhurst and Sedley were two of the wittiest men in the wittiest period of English history, but neither of them could have been too quick by the tenth part of a second for the nimble brain of Nell Gwyn. The house which they kept must have been merry indeed. Nell never minced words, and the conversation at times would have sparkled with a brilliant salacity which might scandalise the most frantically immoral young woman of modern Mayfair. Sedley, moreover, was to Buckhurst as a satyr to Hyperion, and it is unthinkable that he was contented to play gooseberry, and to steal away to a chaste couch while his friend was discovering how sweet, quaint and comical the actress of seventeen could be as a paramour. Indeed, the old women and the young men, with bicycles, who drink their tea on a Saturday afternoon in "Nell Gwynne's Old House" would be aghast if they could see and hear what had once been done and spoken in that tea-house. At the same time we ought not to forget that her two companions had a genuine passion for literature. It was never out of their thoughts or their conversation for very long; and during a sojourn of several weeks Nell would absorb a considerable literary education from listening to their amicable disputes.

On one occasion, at least, "little Sid" gave his friends the slip and took lunch in a big house called "Durdans," at the foot of the Downs. This we know because not only was Mr. Pepys in Epsom, but another diarist also, a lady of quality, no less a person than Mary Rich, "the pious Countess of Warwick": and on the evening of August the 5th, 1667, she took up her quill and inscribed the words: "Went with Lady Robartes and her Lord to Durdans

to see my Lord who was there. At dinner that day dined Sedley, which was much trouble to see him for fear he should be profane. But it pleased God to restrain him: yet the knowledge I had how profane he was, troubled me to be in his company." Meanwhile, Buckhurst and pretty Nell were riding, perhaps, over the high grassy ground and dismounting, to look at the vast and lovely view, just where now the grand-stand, except for a day or two in the year, looms, like a hideous and derelict monster, over the silent, ghostly, paper-littered race-course.

XIX

GOOD-BYE TO BUCKHURST (1667)

THE Epsom affair came to an abrupt and disagreeable end. Unfortunately we know nothing for certain of what happened between Nell and Buckhurst, and we have to divine as much as we can from three or four lines of second-hand gossip.

They had "galloped" or driven to Epsom at the beginning of July. By the 22nd of August Nell was back at the King's Theatre, playing in a revival of the first piece in which she had acted, *The Indian Emperor*. In order to have had time for rehearsals, she must have left Epsom quite early in the month. Mr. Pepys was delighted to find her back at the theatre, but "was most infinitely displeased with her being put to act the Emperor's daughter, which is a great and serious part, which she does most basely." He, of all men, must have been agog with curiosity to know what had caused her return, and he had not to wait long before he had solved the puzzle. Four days later, having seen a play which bored him, he "had a great deal of discourse with [Orange] Moll; who tells us that Nell is already left by my Lord Buckhurst, and that he makes sport of her, and swears she hath had all she could get of him; and Hart, her great admirer, now hates her; and that she is very poor, and hath lost my Lady Castlemaine, who was her great friend, also; but she is come to the [King's] House, but is neglected by them all."

It is obvious that the escapade had ended in a quarrel. The statement that Buckhurst was not going to give her any more money suggests that she had

made financial demands which he thought were unreasonable. We know that he was surprisingly generous, and we know, from her subsequent record, that Nell was no hard-headed avaricious adventuress. We also know that she was fantastically extravagant. It looks very much as though she had been recklessly pledging his credit in those of the Epsom shops which provided jewellery and dresses for the fashionable visitors from London. The surprising fact that he was now "making sport" of her hints broadly that when he had told her to go she had injudiciously shown that she had no wish to break with him. The truth, in short, may be that Buckhurst had seriously told her, more than once, that she must not spend any more money; that Nell had disregarded his ultimatum, or forgotten it, or treated his concern for money as a quaint masculine foible which she could easily dispose of with a laugh or a kiss; that eventually his lordship had lost patience with her; and that Nell, being told that the affair was at an end, released a comical torrent of Lewknor's Lane vituperation and, miscalculating her man, took up the attitude that he ought to beg her at all costs not to leave him. It is unfortunate for Buckhurst that he should be remembered by an incident in which, for once, he must have behaved as a cad. A gentleman of his wealth and breeding could have no excuse, in the opinion of the twentieth century, for allowing Nell to be "very poor" when she got home to the theatre; and Buckhurst might have behaved more honourably if he could have foreseen how insignificantly he would figure in history by comparison with his giddy-minded little mistress.

Hart's change of feeling toward her was presumably due to physical jealousy; but the fact that the rest of the company now sent her to Coventry is

presumptive evidence that in her break with Buckhurst it was she who had been in the wrong. On the other hand, it is possible that the actresses considered that a girl who could keep a nobleman only for five weeks was setting a bad precedent which other young lords would be glad to follow: and, knowing her open-handedness, they may have hoped to get golden pickings from Buckhurst's fortune.

The management at least was delighted to have her back. The mild scandal of the Epsom affair was, no doubt, even in those days, an excellent advertisement; and throughout the autumn she worked steadily, if not very happily, in the theatre. After playing the unsuitable part of "Panthea" in a revival of *A King and No King*, she appeared in a revival of another play called *Flora's Vagaries*. Mr. Pepys was there. Indeed, he enjoyed on this occasion one of the most delicious thrills of his many-faceted life. In a word, he examined the inside of the theatre world. "To the King's House," hereports, "and there, going in, met with Knipp, and she took us up into the tiring-rooms: and to the women's shift, where Nell was dressing herself, and was all unready, and is very pretty, prettier than I thought. And into the scene-room, and there sat down, and she gave us fruit." He then read out the cues of Knipp's part in *Flora's Vagaries*, taking her right through it. "But Lord!" he exclaims in his simplicity, "to see how they were both painted would make a man mad, and did make me loathe them; and what base company of men comes among them, and how lewdly they talk! and how poor the men are in their clothes, and yet what a show they make on the stage by candlelight is very observable." Moreover, the Duke's Theatre was at this time getting the better of the King's, and Mr. Pepys noted that "to see how Nell cursed, for having so few people in the pit, was

pretty": and then, as an afterthought to this and an insipid anti-climax, he concludes with "By and by into the pit, and there saw the play, which is pretty good."

Little by little a girl with Nell's genius of charm would win back the liking of her fellow-players, but their disapproval of her affair with Buckhurst continued to smoulder. Knipp, who had taken Pepys into "the women's shift," was probably quite soon her friend again. Beck Marshall, on the contrary, remained hostile; and with her, on a day of October (1667), Nell had one of the few quarrels in her life. Rebecca and the elder Marshall were said to be the daughters of a well-known Presbyterian minister. He had died twelve years ago, during the Commonwealth. Had it not been so, the girls, as likely as not, would never have found their way on to the stage. Nobody knows the subject of this quarrel, for we overhear only the very end of it. The backchat had become venomous. The fur was flying. And then, very surprisingly in view of what Cunningham says about the actresses of the time, Rebecca could keep it back no longer and, reverting to the standards of her Presbyterian girlhood, taunted Nell with being the mistress of Buckhurst. Nell flared up at once, and retorted, "I was but one man's mistress, though I was brought up in a brothel to fill strong water to the guests; but you are a mistress to three or four, though a Presbyter's praying daughter!" This frank avowal of her sordid beginnings will reveal, to anyone who can see a landscape through a pin-hole, the uncommon honesty of Nell's nature and a certain moral idealism which her circumstances had never fostered.

We can see her, for the rest of that year, only through the spectacles of Mr. Pepys. On November the 11th he took his wife and her new maid Willett

to see that old favourite *The Indian Emperor*; and once more he confirmed his opinion that Nell was poor in a tragic or poetic part. "A good play," he commented, "but not so good as people cry it up, I think, though above all things Nell's ill-speaking of a great part made me mad." Unfortunately Mr. Pepys was not the last critic to be incapable at times of distinguishing between a play itself and the playing of it. On Boxing Day he was again irritated by Nell's misrepresentation of a similar part. "Home, and there ate a bit," he says pleasantly, "and then with my wife to the King's playhouse, and there saw *The Surprisal*; which did not please me to-day, the actors not pleasing me: and especially Nell's acting of a serious part, which she spoils." This repeated complaint is of some interest. If we may assume that most playgoers agreed with Pepys (and he was that supposedly mythical person, the Average Man) we are left with the strange fact that still, after three years, the management persisted in making her frequently play sentimental or melodramatic parts. We shall soon find that Dryden had realised their mistake; and on the assumption that Tom Killigrew, with all his experience, must have realised it too, we can only assume that the casting of Nell for such parts was an instance of Sir Robert Howard's foolish obstinacy. She may even have had some gift for interpreting these parts and have failed in them so completely because she had a comedy-face, a comedy-personality, and was, in fact, of the rare type that seems droll even when it most wishes to be serious.

Two days afterwards she made amends to Mr. Pepys. He went once more to the foolish piece about the fat lover and the lean one, and charitably decided that it was "but an ordinary play." To this he adds: "Nell's and Hart's mad parts are most excellently done, but especially hers: which makes it a miracle

to me to think how ill she do any serious part, as, the other day, just like a fool or changeling; and in a mad part, do beyond imitation almost." He also records an unrehearsed effect which must have made Nell screw her eyes up. "It pleased me mightily," he noted, "to see the natural affection of a poor woman, the mother of one of the children brought on the stage; the child crying, she by force got upon the stage, and took up her child and carried it away off the stage from Hart."

As the old year (by our reckoning) went out Rebecca and the rest of the company must have deplored their severity toward the girl who had not been able to extract a fortune out of Buckhurst. King Charles now "sent" for her "several times": and when Charles sent for a woman everyone knew what he meant.

XX

THE GENIAL SATYR (1668)

MR. BRYANT has lately provided Charles the Second with a very enviable halo. He has done all that is possible to expunge the popular impression—largely due, I take it, to the violent prejudice of Macaulay—that Charles was a bad king. Whatever the Victorians thought of his innumerable sex-affairs (for that is the right word), Edwardians and Georgians look upon them with a chuckling sympathy which more knowledge would probably turn sour. They did, however, still assume that he was a bad king, even if he was a good fellow, and they took this view because there is no gainsaying that he made himself a pensionary of Louis the Fourteenth, and was thankful to do so. Mr. Bryant has shown that he had no choice in the matter and, still more effectively, that it was with Louis's money that Charles built up a new English navy. He proves, too, by quoting the remarks and the letters of Charles, that the King was exceptionally humane and enlightened; but he skilfully conceals the truth that the subject of his engaging portrait had goat's hooves.

We are here concerned with Charles only in his attitude toward women. Fortunately, we possess a brilliant analysis of the matter in the famous character study which Lord Halifax bequeathed to posterity. "It may be said," wrote Halifax, "that his inclinations to love were the effects of health and a good constitution, with as little mixture of the seraphic part as ever man had. And though, from that foundation, men often raise their passions, I

am apt to think that his stayed as much as any man's ever did in the lower region. . . . It was resolved generally by others whom he should have in his arms, as well as whom he should have in his Councils. From a man capable of choosing, he chose as seldom as any man who ever lived. He had more properly, at least in the beginning of his time, a good stomach to his mistresses than any great passion for them." We must remember, too, how frankly he owned, concerning women, that he "never meddled with their *souls*." The evidence is overwhelming, in fact, that in his sex affairs he was goatish and lacking in sensibility, but we ought certainly not to imagine that he behaved like a boor. On the contrary, by comparison with, for example, George the First, he would seem almost an exquisite; for he anticipated the outlook of the twentieth century in very many ways and, among them, in setting up good taste as an alternative to a moral code. The man who said that Presbyterianism was "not a religion fit for a gentleman" would have acted out of character if he had behaved toward women without some grace and consideration. Still, to him they were pretty bodies, and little, if anything, more: and the image of Woman so dominated his mind that his sexual response to any attractive specimen became instant and automatic. He reacted to women precisely as a toper does to a bottle of whisky; like the toper, he found that he needed more and more of the stimulus upon which he relied; and in all probability he also resembled the toper in finding, latterly, that, although he was too far gone to break the habit, he really derived little pleasure from indulging it.

The rakes who were round him had much the same feeling about sex, partly perhaps because many of them had spent their first youth, as Charles had, very largely in a land where people have never grown up



CHARLES II

National Portrait Gallery

efficiently, as the Northern races have, to mingle idealism with the reproductive instinct of the body. Charles himself, we must bear in mind, was actually half a Frenchman by birth, and more than half in spirit. For Charles the Second was his mother's son as surely as James the Second was his father's. His warthy, vivacious, and sharply cut features were manifestly of a Southern type. When he came to England his spiritual home was France. . . . He would have been quite at home in the cocktail bar at the Ritz or in the enclosure at Ascot, except that he might have been considered somewhat disconcertingly 'brainy.' . . . Fundamentally he was an agnostic, and a realist of the most uncompromising type. For national honour he cared no more than a staff. On the other hand, he had an insatiable curiosity with regard to Nature and her processes, and he passed long hours experimenting in his laboratory. About his prospects, or those of others, in any other life than this he was genially indifferent; he believed in getting all the enjoyment there was to be got between the cradle and the grave, and, unlike the Puritans, he liked to see others getting it too."*

His kindliness was almost universal, and he showed it in a high degree toward his many mistresses. They were, with very few exceptions, insatiable in their claims upon his money, and he did his utmost to satisfy their greed. Moreover, he seldom, if ever, abandoned them, as Buckhurst had now abandoned Nell: or, as the whimsical Dasent aptly puts it, "in the language of the card table, he never discarded; he merely added to his hand." He was as fond of his women as he was of his spaniels: both creatures being, in his view, charming and odd little animals.

* Esmé Wingfield-Stratford, in his monumental and magnificent work *A History of British Civilisation*.

His own polygyny seems to have made him tolerant about the sexual experiments of his women. Indeed, it was difficult to disgust him. He remained well disposed toward Lady Castlemaine (Barbara Villiers) long after he had ceased to want her physically; and when he himself had taken a girl-dancer to his bed, he recommended Barbara to cry quits with him by taking Joseph Hall, a male dancer, to hers: nor was it until she had done so that he refused to acknowledge the offspring of whom she was delivered. As a rule he seems to have thought that the paternity of a child was so hard a problem to solve that, if a simple calculation made his own paternity possible, he might as well admit it. He was fond of children and young people, and in the course of his career he must have cheerfully accepted responsibility for a large number of babies who had been begotten by other men.

Nevertheless, his chronic nympholepsy made him a dreaded figure in the eyes of any self-respecting parent who had a comely daughter at Court. Sir Robert Howard had lived so much in the theatre that he can hardly have been a prude; and yet no sooner did Charles, during the performance of a play, begin to cast a favourable eye upon Sir Robert's daughter, Mary, than she was hustled off, at the age of nineteen, to the English Convent of Poor Clares in Paris.* If the reader persists to the end of Nell Gwyn's life-story, and agrees with my diagnosis of her last illness, he may wonder how much Sir Robert knew concerning the King's health.

* The long-sighted Dasent informs us that she became Abbess and died at Paris in 1735.

XXI

A TAVERN SUPPER WITH CHARLES (1668)

AT the beginning of 1668, when Charles had "sent several times for Nelly," he was much enthralled by a rival actress—Moll Davis, the principal dancer in Sir William Davenant's theatre. We know that Nell enchanted the public with her spirited dancing of the jig which often followed a play, but it is evident that, as a dancer, Moll Davis was actually her better. Pepys, for example, has recorded that "little Miss Davis did dance a jig after the end of the play, and there telling the next day's play, so that it came in by force only to please the company to see her dance in boy's clothes; and, the truth is, there is no comparison between Nell's dancing the other day at the King's House in boy's clothes and this, this being infinitely beyond the other." She was, in fact, so brilliant a dancer that a minor poet addressed her as—

Thou Miracle! whom all men must admire
To see thee move like air and mount like fire!
Those who would follow thee, or come but nigh
To thy perfection, must not dance, but fly!

Her affair with the King had caused a general buzz of excitement, many of the old-fashioned gentry regarding it as a scandal and all other actresses wondering hopefully when it should be their good fortune to follow her. By the middle of January it was known to everyone. Pepys, on the 11th, went to the King's Theatre. Luckily for his Diary, Knipp came and sat by him. "Her talk

pleased me little,"* he says breathlessly, "she telling me how Miss Davis is for certain going away from the Duke's House, the King being in love with her; and a house is taken for her, and furnishing; and she hath a ring given her already, worth £600: that the King did send several times for Nelly, and she was with him, but what he did she knows not; this was a good while ago, and she says that the King first spoiled Mrs. Weaver,† which is very mean, methinks, in a Prince; and I am sorry for it, and can hope for no good to the State from having a Prince devoted to his pleasure."

It looks as though Charles, for a time, was driving the two girls tandem. When he first thought seriously of Nell as a possible mistress she was attached, in one way or another, to a young man named Villiers, with whom, we may suppose, she had become acquainted through his powerful kinswoman, Lady Castlemaine. No doubt he aspired to get from Nell as much as might be obtainable: and if we observe, in Sir Peter Lely's portrait of her in the National Portrait Gallery, how her eyes are formed and how her dimples are placed, we shall see that she was a girl who could not help seeming to flirt even when she had no great interest in a man. Nevertheless, although she was only eighteen, she had consorted so much and so freely with men that she must have realised, with Mrs. Peachum, that

By keeping men off, you keep them on;

and, in addition to this, the configuration of her horoscope shows clearly that, contrary to the

* "Pleased me a little," in the Globe edition. The above version seems better to fit the context. The middle of this extract is not in the Globe edition.

† An actress who sometimes played the parts usually played by Mary Knipp.

popular notion, she was not a natural wanton. It is therefore quite likely that young Villiers was sighing in vain.

She did at least like him; and one afternoon he prevailed upon her to go with him to a play at the Duke's Theatre. The King, as it chanced, had decided to be present. He had gone there incognito; but Destiny, seeing her opportunity at last, guided Villiers and Nell to the box that was next to the King's. This, so far as we know, was the first occasion on which he had seen Nell at close quarters. Her face, form, colouring and manner immediately fascinated him. He began to lose interest in the play and, bending forward over the ledge of his box, to talk with her. Nell, as usual, was quite unimpressed by an accident of rank, and no doubt she startled and delighted Charles by talking to him as she would have talked to Mr. Pepys or to her sister's highwayman. Villiers began to grow uneasy; but now that these two had met, nothing could keep them apart. Charles intimated plainly to poor Villiers that he expected to be asked to supper; and in order that he might flirt with Nell and not be incommoded by the presence of her cavalier, he slyly proposed that the Duke of York should complete the party.

Nell, the King, the Duke and the irritated young man betook themselves to an eating-house near by—possibly to the famous Rose Tavern. Villiers and the Duke, we may suppose, talked with tepid interest about politics or the navy, while Nell and Charles enjoyed the delightful experience of trying to out-charm one another: and indeed there can rarely have been such an equal contest. Charles, no doubt, believed that he was on the track of another temporary amusement, and Nell must have been amused to realise that she was again in competition with her rival, Moll Davis. The party continued for some

time, deliciously for Charles and Nell, tediously for James, exasperatingly for the unfortunate Villiers. At length, however, it showed signs of breaking up; but not, we may be sure, before Charles had made up his mind that he must have Nell Gwyn nor before she had realised that, at least for a month or two, she would be the King's mistress. And she knew well enough the effect which the news would have upon Beck Marshall and all those of the players who had cold-shouldered her. The tavern keeper advanced with his bill, and incredible as it seems, Charles and James were in some way so disguised that he did not perceive who they were. Deciding that Charles was the eldest person at the table, the tavern-keeper handed the bill to him. Charles thrust a hand into his pocket, found that he had not brought nearly enough cash to pay for the drinks, and doubtless, using his favourite oath, exclaimed, "Odsfish! we have drunk too deep for my pocket," or a phrase of the kind. He suggested that James should pay, but James had as little ready cash as his brother. At this Nell Gwyn, laughing immoderately at the irony of the situation, and mimicking Charles's voice and manner, cried out: "Odsfish! but here is the poorest company that ever I was in at a tavern!" And in the upshot young Villiers, who had looked forward to a long afternoon with Nell and nobody else, had to settle the reckoning for all four.

It was after this happy encounter that the King "sent" for Nell "several times," but at the moment he was considerably pre-occupied with Moll Davis, too.

XXII

THE OBSTACLE, MOLL DAVIS (1668)

THREE days after Mr. Pepys had first heard of Moll Davis's new occupation, Mrs. Pierce, at all times an active purveyor of succulent gossip, confirmed the rumour and poured into the grateful ear of Samuel the news that she had lately sat next to Miss Davis at the Duke's Theatre, and that Moll "is the most impertinent slut in the world; and the more, now the King do show her countenance; and is reckoned his mistress, even to the scorn of the whole world; the King gazing on her, and my Lady Castlemaine being melancholy and out of humour, all the play, not smiling once. The King"—so Samuel goes rattling on, delightedly shocked by what he is writing—"the King, it seems, hath given her [Moll Davis] a ring of £700, which she shows to everybody, and owns that the King did give it to her; and he hath furnished a house in Suffolk Street most richly for her, which is a most infinite shame. It seems," he added, "she is a bastard of my Lord Berkshire, and that he hath got her for the King." We may doubt whether Moll Davis had ever previously decided that she was partly of noble birth, nor is there any ground for supposing that Lord Berkshire or anyone else was required to beat down any heroic resistance from Moll. Mrs. Pierce was evidently surprised by Charles's choice, for she prattled on that Miss Davis was "the most homely jade as ever she saw, though she dances beyond anything in the world." Nor did she stop there, but showed, by the parting lollipop of news that she let fall into Samuel's open mouth, that Charles, while taking his pleasure

of Moll Davis and planning to take it of Nell Gwyn, still hankered after the lovely and inaccessible Frances Stewart. "The Duchess of Richmond [Frances Stewart]," babbled Mrs. Pierce, "do not [even] yet come to the Court, nor hath seen the King, nor will come, nor do he own his desire of seeing her; but hath used means to get her to Court, but they do not take."

It was a strange chance that had made Charles desirous at the same moment of Nell Gwyn and of Moll Davis, for the two girls had been pitted against each other both by their managements and by the public. Moll Davis had recently aroused a furore by her singing, in a play, of a certain woeful ballad which even now is not completely forgotten. Apparently Sir William Davenant had inserted it, in a lucky hour, when he was engaged upon transforming *The Two Noble Kinsmen* into a play which he called *The Rivals*. Three of the verses, here quoted with a purpose, run as follows:

My lodging it is on the cold ground,
 And very hard is my fare,
 But that which troubles me most is
 The unkindness of my dear.
 Yet still I cry 'O turn, love,
 And I prythee, love, turn to me,
 For thou art the man that I long for—
 And alack, what remedy?

I'll crown thee with garlands of straw, then,
 And I'll marry thee with a rush ring;
 My frozen hopes shall thaw then,
 And merrily we will sing
 "O turn to me, my dear love,
 And I prythee, love, turn to me,
 For thou art the man that alone can'st
 Procure my liberty."

THE OBSTACLE, MOLL DAVIS

But if thou wilt harden thy heart still
And be deaf to my pitiful moan,
Then I must endure the smart still,
And tumble in straw alone.
Yet still I cry "O turn, love,
And I prythee, love, turn to me,
For thou art the man that alone art
The cause of my misery."

This ballad was an instant hit and, set to a dainty tune, went as rapidly all over "the town" as the vulgarest "theme-song" of our own time. If Killigrew could not think of a counter-attraction, the entire theatre-going public would abandon the King's Theatre in favour of the Duke's. Fortunately, the song, as we see, is an open invitation to the parodist, and a parodist came to Killigrew's rescue. While Moll's ballad was still drawing crowds to hear her, the players at the rival theatre revived the sad farce about the fat lover and the lean. For some time it progressed along the lines which were now familiar to many persons in the audience. Nell, for example, playing the part of Mirida, said to her fat lover, Pinguisier:

Dear love, come sit thee in my lap, and let me know
if I can enclose thy world of fat and love within these
arms. . . . See, I cannot nigh compass my desires by a mile.

To this, Pinguisier, sorely cast down, replied

How is my fat a rival to my joys? Sure, I shall weep it
all away,

and proceeded to blubber as ludicrously as he could. Nell, rocking his grotesque bulk to and fro, then crooned the words:

Lie still, my babe, lie still and sleep:
It grieves me sore to see thee weep:
Wert thou but leaner, I were glad:
Thy fatness makes thy dear love sad.

To which she added, "*What* a lump of love have I in my arms!"

By this time the more intelligent persons in the playhouse must have been growing very dismal, and it is only by suffering with them, in imagination, that we can relish the sudden electrification of the entire audience when Nell, using the topical tune and mimicking Moll Davis, cheerfully piped out:

My lodging is on the cold boards,
And wonderful hard is my fare,
But that which troubles me most is
The fatness of my dear.
Yet still I cry "O melt, love,
And I prythee now melt apace,
For thou art the man I should long for
If 'twere not for thy grease. . . ."

And the audience, now thoroughly waked up, listened, breathless with delight, as the fat lover wailed in response:

Then prythee don't harden thy heart still
And be deaf to my pitiful moan,
Since *I* do endure the smart still,
And for my fat do groan.
Then prythee now turn, my dear love,
And I prythee now turn to me,
For alas! I am too fat still
To roll so far to thee.

Moll Davis, to be sure, was highly incensed when she heard that this other girl, in the rival company, was making fun of her great success, but for one reason or another she was soon upon visiting terms with Nell. From her portrait we might judge that she was not more intellectual than most subsequent singers and dancers. In fact, to put it baldly, she looks vain and empty-headed. We know, however, from prattling Mrs. Pierce, that when she had caught



MOLL DAVIS

Sir Peter Lely National Portrait Gallery

the King's fancy she became exceedingly stuck up. When she visited Nell, therefore, she probably went in order to exhibit her six- or seven-hundred-pound ring and, in general, to make Nell feel as inferior as she could. Nell had invited her in the knowledge that she had received a summons to spend that evening with the King, and this opportunity of putting Moll in her place, thought Nell, was much too good to be lost. Accordingly, while they chatted—while Nell, perhaps, extravagantly but enviously admired the ring—she plied Moll with sweetmeats of which Moll availed herself abundantly. A few hours later she must have been ready to tear out Nell's eyes; for the latter had filled the sweets with jalap, a preparation, made from a tuberous root of a Mexican convolvulaceous plant, which, I have always understood, is administered to the elephants in the Zoological Gardens whenever they are afflicted with obstinate constipation. We do not know, of course, what Charles thought on that peculiar evening, but if, as is possible, Moll Davis began to curse Nell, he would doubtless have felt, whatever we may feel, that the joke was overwhelmingly amusing.

Moll for a time was in the superior position. She left the stage, while Nell continued to act and dance. It is therefore possible that for a few weeks Nell was merely a gay companion at some of Charles's dinner-parties. Knowing how near she now was to becoming his mistress, and that she herself was aware of it, we may wonder if she was quite happy to be involved in a certain dangerous play by Sir Robert Howard. This play—*The Great Favourite, or the Duke of Lerma*—was produced late in February, 1668. Charles attended the first performance: and the prologue, according to the printed version, was "spoken by Mrs. Ellen and Mrs. Nepp (Knipp)." On this occasion Nell was outdone by her friend—

at least in the opinion of Mr. Pepys. "Knipp and Nell," he commented, "spoke the prologue most excellently, especially Knipp, who spoke beyond any creature I ever heard." After this he added that the play was designed to reproach King Charles about his mistresses; that he quite expected the King to stop the performance; but that "it ended all well, which solved all."

As for Moll Davis, now living in luxury at her house in Suffolk Street, she said good-bye to the Duke's Theatre in the spring of 1668. No doubt she would have left the stage in any event; for a girl who had received a ring worth seven hundred pounds, or even six, would not be disposed to toil in the theatre for an annual salary of perhaps fifty or sixty: but the King's activity had left her no choice. A few months after her farewell performance she gave birth, in her Suffolk Street house, to a daughter. Charles at once owned his paternity; and the infant, who subsequently went by the name of Lady Mary Tudor, became in due time the wife of the Earl of Derwentwater.* Charles very soon tired of Miss Davis. Perhaps he found her altogether too "homely a jade," or perhaps she suffered unluckily by having Nell Gwyn as a rival bedfellow, for shortly after the birth of the baby Charles pensioned off the mother on a thousand pounds a year. This, of course, was a very handsome allowance in those days, and Moll seems not to have gone back to the theatre. She probably thought herself to be far above it. For the rest, all that we know of her is that for a

* Her son, Lord Derwentwater, was beheaded in 1716, after the Jacobite Rising. He, Lord Kenmure and Lord Nithsdale, who were acquainted with each other, should all have been executed on the same day, but Lady Nithsdale, riding from Dumfries in icy weather, rescued her husband from the Tower by disguising him as a woman.

time she lived in St. James's Square, at a house which was demolished in 1848 in order that the Army and Navy Club might be built on the site: and that apparently she died in 1687—two years after the death of the King. As the mother of one of Charles's children she would be invited to Court, and to a girl of her elementary type the fringe of the Court would undoubtedly be more attractive than the centre of the stage.

XXIII

STAGE WORK (1668-1669)

THROUGHOUT the year 1668 Nell continued to work hard at the King's Theatre. A list of forgotten plays cannot make lively reading, but it is possible, thanks to Mr. Pepys, to add a little humanity to the catalogue: and a reference to her appearance does at least show that, in spite of Charles's interest in her, she was not yet able or else willing to give up acting.

In February she spoke the epilogue to Sir Robert's play, *The Great Favourite, or The Duke of Lerma*: the epilogue in which she owns to her hatred of "serious parts." In March and in April she resumed her old part in *The English Monsieur*. A month later Mr. Pepys, hurrying to the stage door with the intention of giving Knipp a lift home in his coach, "did see Beck Marshall come dressed, off the stage, and look mighty fine, and pretty, and noble; and also Nell, in her boy's clothes, mighty pretty." By this date he had evidently resigned himself to their make-up: "but lord!" he exclaimed, "their confidence! and how many men do hover about them as soon as they come off the stage, and how confident they are in their talk!" Nevertheless, he enjoyed himself immensely. "Here," he noted with pride, "I did kiss the pretty woman, newly come, called Peg, that was Sir Charles Sedley's mistress, a mighty pretty woman, and seems, but is not, modest."*

* The wide-awake Dasent, in dealing with this little incident, is for once caught napping. He says that Nell had been acting at the Duke's Theatre in Davenant's play *The Man's the Master*; but Pepys, having seen the play, went over to the King's Theatre to find Knipp.

On May the 18th Nell played, they think, in Sedley's well-known comedy *The Mulberry Garden*, and on the 30th in Beaumont and Fletcher's *Philaster, or, Love lies a-Bleeding*. This play, written so long ago as 1609, became deeply associated with the admirable performances of Nell Gwyn and Charles Hart, as we learn from a late reference to it which will come more fitly at another point in the story. The play, in fact, being revived even in 1763, enjoyed a length of life which is rare indeed in dramatic history. Early in June Nell played in Dryden's mediocre piece *An Evening's Love, or the Mock Astrologer*; and it is possible that before the theatre was closed for the summer vacation she created a part in *The Old Troop*, a play, reminiscent of his campaigning days during the Civil War, by her old associate, the actor Lacy.

After the holidays she was not so busy: unless she appeared in revivals of which, because Mr. Pepys did not patronise them, we have no record. In September she figured in *The Ladies à la Mode*, a translation by Dryden from a French original. It failed badly and seems to have completely disappeared. Its failure, in fact, was so pronounced as to amuse even the company which had just played it. "So mean a thing it is," wrote Samuel, "as, when they came to say it would be acted again to-morrow, both he that said it, Beeston, and the pit fell a-laughing, there being this day not a quarter of the pit full." Again, just before Christmas, Nell, "in an Amazonian habit," spoke the prologue to *Catiline's Conspiracy* (Ben Jonson), a play which Pepys thought to be better suited to the study than to the stage: and most modern drama-lovers will agree with him.

In order to picture Nell's life at this time we have only to think of stage life as it now is and to intensify our impression. Her world was a small,

shallow, vain and excitable world. The theatre managers, no doubt, had as much difficulty as their successors in keeping the interest of the public, and for the same reason, namely, that living all day in the atmosphere of the theatre, they could only judge of a play as a box of tricks and had lost all capacity to see it with the eyes of the general world. And actors and actresses, no doubt, could talk of little except salaries and the gossip of the stage. They formed, even more than they form now, an over-specialised type: and they were considerably more bohemian. Pepys, writing on a day of January 1669, gives us a clear little picture of Nell and a sister actress attending a performance. He and his wife had no sooner settled themselves to watch a certain play than "the jade Nell," who of course could not have been acting that afternoon, "came and sat in the next box; a bold merry slut, who lay laughing there upon the people; and with a comrade of the Duke's House, that came in to see the play."

In the spring of that year she acted in a tragedy that had a surprise ending. The play was Dryden's *Tyrannic Love, or the Royal Martyr*. He must have hesitated a long while before risking the anti-climax of an epilogue which is one of the deftest which even he composed. It shows unmistakably that Nell's personality was strong enough, and attractive enough, to be worth exploiting at any cost. Perhaps it also shows that Dryden, who was always unpoetically canny, had not much confidence in this particular work. "The poet," he wrote, in another epilogue,

The poet has one disadvantage more,
That if his play is dull, he's damned all o'er,
Not only a damned blockhead, but damned poor,

and he may now have calculated that Nell's amus-

ing personality was a safer investment than his tragical lines. At least he had hit upon a brilliant example of showmanship. It was, however, not entirely novel. At the end of *The Vestal Virgin, or the Roman Ladies*, by Howard, when it was acted in 1665, Lacy, stepping forward after all the principals except two had been killed, said:

By your leave, Gentlemen,—
After a sad and dismal tragedy,
I do suppose that few expected *me*.

Nell Gwyn appeared in the part of a Roman maiden who mortally stabbed herself in the last scene. The stage at this period had no curtain, and a dead character had therefore to be carried away by bearers. On this occasion, just as the audience was blowing its nose and pretending not to have cried, a bearer came forward to remove Nell ceremoniously into the wings when, leaping to life, she struck an attitude and cried out:

Hold! Are you mad, you damn'd confounded dog?
I am to rise and speak the epilogue!

Then, turning to the spectators, she put them all into the utmost good-humour by saying—

I come, kind gentlemen, strange news to tell ye;
I am the ghost of poor departed Nelly.
Sweet ladies, be not frightened: I'll be civil;
I'm what I was—a little harmless devil. . . .

a phrase that reveals in a flash how affectionately both Dryden and the public regarded her. A few lines later he gave Nell an opportunity of transmitting charm which any actress would appreciate. "Gallants, look to't," she continued:

You say there are no sprites,
But I'll come dance about your beds at nights;

PRETTY WITTY NELL

And, faith, you'll be in a sweet kind of taking
When I surprise you between sleep and waking.
To tell you true, I walk because I die
Out of my calling, in a tragedy.
O poet: damned dull poet, who could prove
So senseless—to make Nelly die for love!
Nay, what's yet worse, to kill me in the prime
Of Easter-term, in tart and cheese-cake time!
I'll fit the fop; for I'll not one word say
T' excuse his godly, out-of-fashion play;
A play which, if you dare but twice sit out,
You'll all be slandered, and be thought devout.
But farewell, gentlemen; make haste to me:
I'm sure ere long to have your company.
As for my epitaph when I am gone,
I'll trust no poet, but will write my own:—
Here Nelly lies, who, though she lived a slattern,
Yet died a princess, acting in St. Cathar'n.

Dryden's device became the talk of the town. There is, for example, a reference to it in the epilogue of another play where the speaker observes:

It is a trick of late grown much in vogue,
When all are killed, to raise an epilogue.
This some Pert Rhymer wittily contriv'd
For a surprize, whilst the Arch Wag believed
'Twould please you to see Pretty Miss revived.

Dryden's own epilogue contains two points of interest. It shows that he had fully realised Nell's unsuitability for "serious parts," and inasmuch as the management continued to present her in tragedy we can gauge her box-office value. Again, we are told by another contemporary that in early life she "let her clothes hang about her as they would," and when Dryden made her say that she "lived a slattern," he must have been referring to a peculiarity which was familiar—and perhaps attractive—to the public.

STAGE WORK

At this point in her story we lose the invaluable company of our gossip Samuel Pepys, for in May 1669, believing that he was about to go blind, he made the last entry, pathetic and courageous, in his Diary. A little later Nell probably heard from Knipp that Mrs. Pepys had died, soon after she and Samuel had come back from a holiday in France: but when she heard this news Nell was greatly pre-occupied. According to tradition, her delivery of the burlesque epilogue delighted King Charles so much that, as soon as the play was over, he went to "the women's shift" and carried her off to supper: and it must have been upon this occasion, or very soon afterwards, that he also took her to bed.

XXIV

BIRTH OF HER FIRST CHILD (1670)

SHE did not act any more for a long time, the reason being that in August 1669 she became pregnant. If Moll Davis had proved less disappointing, Charles would presumably have treated Nell as magnificently as he had treated Moll; but this time there is no scandal about a ring worth seven hundred pounds or a superbly furnished house. True, Nell did move from her lodgings in Drury Lane to a house in Lincoln's Inn Fields, and there can be no doubt that Charles paid her expenses; but when she became the King's acknowledged mistress she only asked, according to Burnet, for five hundred pounds a year.

It is surprising, too, that she seems not to have thought of abandoning the stage. During her pregnancy Dryden finished a new work, *Almanzor and Almahide, or The Conquest of Granada by the Spaniards*, a mammoth tragedy in two parts, and he actually stayed its production until she could appear in it. At length, on the 8th of May, 1670, she was delivered of a son. She named him Charles: and sometimes, in all likelihood, referred to him as Charles the Fourth. We know that she amused the King by saying that he might be Charles the Second to the rest of his subjects, but that to her he was Charles the Third. The discrepancy, she explained, was due to the fact that Hart had been her first Charles and Sackville (Lord Buckhurst) her second. In all probability "Charles the Third" was not in London at the time of the baby's birth and was not even thinking of Nell at all. His sister, Henrietta—the adored Minette to whom he wrote his most charming



LOUISE DE QUÉROUAILLES

Pierre Mignard. National Portrait Gallery

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letters—arrived in England at the same time. She came from France on a secret diplomatic errand, and with her came Louise de Quérouaille, who was destined to be Nell Gwyn's continual rival at Whitehall. Our ancestors were immensely amused by the French fashions which, naturally, Minette and her retinue were wearing. The ladies wore circular hats of such a fantastic size that the English spoke of them as "cartwheels"; and the gentlemen looked very comical to unaccustomed eyes by reason of the extreme shortness of their coats and the great breadth of their belts. These costumes created such a sensation that within a very short time the quick-witted management of the Duke's Theatre decided to exploit the popular ridicule. Nokes, the principal low comedian, attracted large audiences to the Duke's Theatre by appearing in a parody of the Frenchman's clothes, with an even broader belt and an even briefer coat, so that he must have looked much like an organ-grinder's monkey: and so good did the joke seem to Englishmen of the time that Charles's first-born, the Duke of Monmouth, was only too pleased to provide Nokes with a sword and a waist-belt of his own.

Moreover, the joke did not stale. The first part of Dryden's huge drama came out at last in December 1670: when Nell's child was seven months old. At the end of the epilogue Dryden, with the frankness and common sense of his time, explained to the audience why the play had been held back, writing of himself as follows:

Think him not duller for this year's delay;
 He was prepared, the women were away;
 And men, without their parts, can hardly play.
 If they, through sickness, seldom did appear,
 Pity the Virgins of each theatre:
 For at both houses 'twas a sickly year.

The prologue, however, was the portion of the day's entertainment upon which the management most confidently relied. No sooner did the audience see Nell Gwyn step forward to the centre of the stage than they burst out laughing immoderately: for there she stood, her middle swathed round with an enormous belt or sash, and a cartwheel hat of such vast circumference that for a moment or two the spectators cannot have recognised the small face which it surrounded. The lines that she now spoke begin briskly with:

This jest was first of the other House's making,
And, five times tried, has never failed of taking;
For 'twere a shame a poet should be killed
Under the shelter of so broad a shield.
This is that hat, whose very sight did win ye
To laugh and clap as though the devil were in ye.
As then for Nokes, so now I hope you'll be
So dull, to laugh once more for love of me.
"I'll write a play," says one, "for I have got
A broad-brimmed hat and waist-belt t'wards a plot."
Says t'other, "I have one more large than that":
Thus they out-write each other—with a hat!
The brims still grew with every play they writ;
And grew so large, they covered all the wit.
Hat was the play; 'twas language, wit and tale:
Like them that find meat, drink and cloth in ale . . .

And Dryden, in the concluding lines, clearly expresses the age-long disgust of all dramatists who see their public greedily gobbling up a silly topical stunt. "Henceforth," exclaimed Nell:

let poets, ere allowed to write,
Be searched, like duellists before a fight,
For broad-wheel hats, dull humour, all that chaff
Which makes *you* mourn, and makes the vulgar laugh.

And when we learn that some of Minette's retinue

were present while the audience uproariously applauded this ridiculing of their costumes, we may at first feel sorry. Indeed, we may also be surprised that Charles, whose manners were usually so far in advance of his time, should have countenanced such behaviour towards the nation's guests: but we must remember that foreigners, and particularly Frenchmen, were much more absurd in the seventeenth century than they are now, and that, as inferior animals, they were not supposed by Englishmen to have any feelings. In the end, fashion, as usual prevailed over a sense of the ludicrous. There is, for example, a portrait of the Countess of Kildare in which she is wearing a cartwheel hat; and within a year or two the French fashion seemed no more absurd to Nell and her public than plus-fours now seem to a golfer.

If Charles had been concentrating his sexual interest as much upon Nell Gwyn as he had once concentrated it upon Moll Davis, he would presumably not have allowed her, especially after she had borne him a son, to reappear on the stage: but the grace, the breeding, the French finish, of Louise de Quérouailles had excited his passion, and it was she who now held the first place in his mind. To despise Louise would be rash, for a woman whom Voltaire admired must have had some beauty and probably some brains. Nell appeared in a revival of *An Evening's Love*, in a revival of *A King and No King*, and possibly in a new play called *The Black Prince*. Nevertheless, though she did not know it and never said a formal farewell to the stage, her career as an actress was now ending. She had found, as a mother, the occupation for which nature had intended her: and not only, perhaps, as a mother to the child of her body but as a spiritual mother to Charles himself.

She may well have regretted the loss of her theatre life much more than Moll Davis had, for she liked the public as cordially as the public liked her: and she was temperamentally at home in a noisy, swearing, free-and-easy company. Moreover, remembering the fate of Moll Davis, now marooned in Suffolk Street, and the end of her own affair with Buckhurst, she must have had little sense of security with Charles. She may even have made a joke of her new position and have told Killigrew that she would come back to the theatre when the King had tired of her. As all the world knows, he never did tire of her. She was obviously more to his taste than any other woman, and he must have been surprised by the strength of the affection which she aroused in him. For this there were, I suspect, various causes. Cecil Chesterton* divined one part of the truth when he suggested that Moll Davis wearied the King by trying to behave like a born lady and that Nell delighted him by remaining a warm-hearted, quick-witted little cockney, unashamed of her sordid past and so daintily pretty that her great oaths must have sounded amusingly inappropriate. Moreover, Louise continually tried to influence English politics. Nell, on the contrary, described herself as "in respect of the State, a sleeping-partner."

She was now twenty-one, and in six years had made a permanent name as an actress. This was the more remarkable because the available dramatic work was rarely of a kind which gave full scope to her genius for intimacy with the audience. If we bear in mind her success in the handling of any theatrical "stunt"—how tellingly she had parodied Moll Davis's great song-hit, how Dryden had entrusted her with a comic epilogue to a tragedy, and

* *Nell Gwyn*, by Cecil Chesterton (1912).

BIRTH OF HER FIRST CHILD

how brilliantly she had carried off the Big Hat effect—we can see that she would have broken all records in modern revue. If we examine her stage-career we shall be impressed by the number of times that two of Dryden's plays were revived—*Secret Love* and *The Indian Emperor*; and it is a point of the greatest significance that after her retirement *Secret Love* was not performed for ten years and *The Indian Emperor* not for eleven. The management evidently felt that it would be useless to present these plays without her. Again, twenty-four years after she had left the stage, and eight years after her death, she was still a delightful and vivid memory. A poet, writing a new prologue for that evergreen play *Philaster or Love-lies-a-bleeding*, said, with a tenderness that suggests a looking-backward to the happy experiences of his youth:

That good old play, Philaster, ne'er can fail;
But we young actors, how shall we prevail?
Philaster and Bellario, let me tell ye,
For these bold parts we have no Hart, no Nelly,
Those darlings of the stage. . . .

Posterity was already beginning to fall in love with her.

XXV

SIR JOHN COVENTRY'S NOSE (1670-1671)

EASY ETHEREDGE, in a filthy lampoon, makes the exceedingly improbable statement that the Duke of Buckingham recommended Charles to try Nell Gwyn as an alternative to that hysterical and irascible gold-digger, Barbara Villiers, who had now become Duchess of Cleveland. He puts into Buckingham's mouth the lines:

Permit me, Sir, to recommend a Whore:
Kiss her but once, you'll ne'er want Cleveland more.
She'll fit you to a hair,—all Wit, all Fire
And Impudency, to your Heart's Desire;
And more than this, Sir, you'll save money by her.
She's Buckhurst's Whore at present; but you know—
When Sovereigns want, their Subjects must forgo.

If Nell had seen Etheredge's lampoon, she would not have grievously resented it. She was used to being called a whore. On one occasion at least, and probably on hundreds, that is the description which she gave to herself. When, for example, she had become rich enough to have a coach of her own, she found one day that her coachman was fighting another man, and the coachman, answering her enquiry into the origin of the battle, replied that his opponent had referred to her as a whore. To this Nell retorted: "Go to, you blockhead! Never fight in such a cause. If you want to risk your carcase, do so in defence of the truth." "You may not mind being called a whore," grumbled the rueful pugilist, "but I'll not be called a whore's coachman." Fortunately, this fight about Nell did not end, as

another had, in tragedy. On a day in the previous June—that is to say, of 1670, just after the birth of Nell's son—two men had quarrelled violently over the question whether Nell Gwyn or Peg Hughes was the prettier woman. Peg (the reader may recall) was the actress whom Mr. Pepys had kissed, relishing the kiss all the more because she had been the mistress of Sir Charles Sedley. The quarrel ended in a fierce fight, and a lady reports in a letter that “one of the King's servants”—an actor at the King's Theatre—“has killed Mr. Hughes, Peg Hughes' brother . . . upon a dispute whether Nelly or she was the handsomer now at Windsor.”

In the early days of her association with Charles, Nell was more concerned to make fun of Barbara Villiers than of Louise de Quérouailles. Barbara, for example, was determined to make a more magnificent effect than any other lady in the land. She went so far, even, as to drive out in a coach-and-eight, a display of wealth and arrogance which impressed nobody so much as herself; and it is easy to imagine the fury with which she heard one day that Nell Gwyn had been parading London in a coach drawn by eight oxen. With impudent jokes of this kind Nell certainly did much to strengthen her hold of a king who, perhaps on account of life-weariness and an innate melancholy, was avid of amusement. Nor was it only Nell who began to benefit by his affection for her. Rose Gwyn, too, had at this time good reason to be thankful for her sister's romantic exaltation. In 1671 Rose's husband, the highwayman, was in grave difficulties. He was apprehended on a charge of attempting to burgle the house of Sir Henry Littleton, and he must have been proved guilty. In a petition to Charles he put forward the customary plea, which may yet have been justifiable, that his father had lost a goodly estate in Ireland

through having been loyal to the late King: but Charles, when he decided to pardon and release the prisoner, was probably impelled more effectively by his own good-nature and by Nell's intervention. Cassells may have deserved to die "by falling from a platform while in conversation with a clergyman," but he lived for another fourteen years. They say that Cassells left Rose almost penniless, but the fact that she subsequently made a much more respectable marriage suggests that somebody—probably Nell—maintained her well enough to prevent her from sinking back into the mire from which the Gwyn family had marvellously extricated itself.

Rose, in fact, was herself becoming, on a small scale, a public figure. This is made evident by an unexpected reference to her in some sad doggerel about Nell and Charles: doggerel which one writer astonishingly attributes to so neat and subtle a poet as Andrew Marvell. The last three stanzas run (or hobble) thus:

Our good King Charles the Second,
 Too flippant of treasure and moisture,
 Stoop'd from the Queen infecund
 To a Wench of Orange and Oyster.
 Consulting his Catzo, he found it expedient
 To waste time in revels with *Nell* the Comediant.

The lecherous vainglory
 Of being lim'd with Majesty,
 Mounts up to such a story
 This Bitchington Travesty
 That, to equal her lover, the Baggage must dare
 To be Helen the Second, the Cause of a War.

If the sister of Rose
 Be a whore so anointed
 That the Parliament's Nose
 Must for her be disjointed,
 Then should you but name the Prerogative "whore,"
 How the Bullets would whistle, the Cannons would roar!

The reference in the last verse is to the lamentable affair of Sir John Coventry's Nose, an outrage that whipped up as much excitement in its day as the now more famous affair of Jenkins's Ear. The nation was beginning to recover its sobriety after the first headlong scramble for pleasure which followed the home-coming of Charles, and now the King's insatiable lust for women was arousing widespread shame and disgust. His acquisition of two mere actresses, not as bedfellows for a night but as recognised favourites, seemed, no doubt, to threaten the social security and to lower the dignity of the ruling class. Thoroughly incensed by Charles's behaviour, Sir John Coventry, the member for Weymouth, proposed in Parliament that an entertainment-tax should be levied on the theatres. He was answered, rather lamely, that the theatres gave much pleasure to the King. This was too much for Sir John who, on a luckless impulse, inquired "whether the King's pleasure did lie among the men or among the women who acted?"

The House of Commons approved his plain speaking, but the Court was all of a-flutter; and Sir John, a few days afterwards, while driving in his coach, was dragged out of it by a gang of roughs under the direction of a Sir Thomas Sandys and a Captain O'Brien. They proceeded to correct his manners by slitting his nose to the bone. Many supposed that Nell Gwyn, enraged (as Barbara Villiers would have been) by Sir John's reference to the King's interest in Moll Davis and herself, had stormed Charles into intimating that he would be obliged to any gentleman who would punish the plain speaker, but nothing imaginable could be more out of character. They were judging Nell by themselves: and it is gratifying to learn that in the end Sir John, though his nose could never have recovered its first beauty,

did triumph over the zealous defenders of the King's dishonour. Parliament, infuriated by their handiwork, passed an Act whereby anyone who "shall put out the eye, cut the lip, nose or tongue of any of His Majesty's liege people," or "in any other manner wound or maim any Parliament man," should be imprisoned for a year, pay heavy damages and suffer other penalties. The affair seems to have initiated one of Nell's lifelong friendships; for the Lady Sandys whom she once took to a play at Whitehall and the Lucy Sandys who witnessed her will are presumably not only one and the same person but also the wife of the man who had superintended the barbarous punishment of Sir John Coventry.



NELL GWYN

Sir Peter Lely. National Portrait Gallery

XXVI

THE LIFE AND SOUL OF THE PARTY (1672)

CHARLES was beginning to realise that Nell Gwyn would make a better companion than Moll Davis. He decided that Lincoln's Inn Fields was too far away from St. James's Palace, and accordingly he offered her at the end of 1670 a small house in Pall Mall. At first she was delighted, but when her lawyer explained that the property was a leasehold she told him to put the lease back in his pocket for she would have nothing to do with it. At their next meeting Charles asked her what was the matter, and Nell, pretending that he had insulted her, asked if it was fair to give her merely a leasehold when she had given him the freehold of herself. The King, who always played up to a joke, whatever the cost, agreed to look round for something better. Just at this time the Earl of Scarsdale had settled himself in a fine house, a few doors away from the rejected leasehold—a house, too, which would suit both Nell and Charles peculiarly well. The Earl, at a hint from his sovereign, obligingly moved out again, and Nell stepped in. For the rest of her life this new house was her London home. It was a stone-built house, long-windowed, with three storeys topped by attics for the servants. It stood on the site of the Eagle Assurance Company's office at No. 79 Pall Mall, and the end of the garden at the back of it met the end of the King's garden. The two gardens touched, in fact, on the ground which is now covered by Marlborough House, and the convenience of this arrangement is revealed, with more charm than he intended, by a passage in Evelyn's Diary. "I had

a fair opportunity," he says, "of talking to His Majesty in the lobby next to the Queen's side, where I presented him with some sheets of my History. I thence walked with him through St. James's Park to the garden, where I both saw and heard a very familiar discourse between him and Mrs. Nellie, as they call an impudent comedian; she looked out of her garden on a terrace at the top of the walk, and he standing on the green walk under it. I was heartily sorry at this scene."

Evelyn might perhaps have been even sorrier if he had known that Nell was now pregnant for the second time. The child made his appearance on Christmas Day, 1671. She named him after the Duke of York. James was a man so stiff, so fanatical in his Catholicism and so devoid of humour that it does credit to both of them that he and Nell should always have liked one another. He must have known that her popularity with the crowd was partly due to her Protestantism; and someone would certainly have told him that his nickname at 79 Pall Mall was "dismal Jimmy": but the last phase of her life shows clearly that she learned to regard him as a good and trustworthy friend, and that he had a genuine fondness for her.

She was now prosperous and happy. Remembering how open-handed she was and how staunch in her affections, we may assume that she entertained most of her old theatre friends in the newly won splendour of the house in Pall Mall. She was also associating as an equal, in her own opinion if not in theirs, with the most highly placed personages of the time: with the Queen, who liked her and to whom she was nominally attached as a Lady of the Privy Chamber; with the Duke of Monmouth, whom she called "Perkin," hinting that he was in a position similar to Perkin Warbeck's; with young

Captain Churchill, who was just of an age with her; and with all the politicians who drifted about Whitehall, and all the ladies who passed in and out of Charles's bedroom. A gossipy letter of this date, describing the ladies at Whitehall, gives us a bright picture of the world in which Nell now moved. "They say," reported the letter-writer to her daughter in the country, "that there [in Whitehall] is the greatest gallantry: silver and gold lace all over the petticoats and the bodies of their gowns, but sleeves and skirts black, abundance of curls very small on their heads, and very fine their head dresses."

No one, even in an age of reckless lampooning, ever suggested that Nell was not faithful to the King; but he could no longer be satisfied with one woman and was probably consorting with three or four at the same time. Barbara Villiers had lost her hold on him for good. Charles and she had been intimately associated from the latter days of his exile, and in spite of her frequent tantrums and her insatiable cupidity he was unable for years to break free from her. At about this time, however, he had evidently become disgusted. She was throwing herself at young Churchill, the future Duke of Marlborough and victor of Blenheim; and one evening, while he was in her bedroom, they heard with dismay the approaching footsteps of the King. Churchill attempted, very scantily clothed, to escape by the window, but he was not nimble enough to elude the quick eyes of her visitor. To his measureless relief Charles took the situation with humour and said to him benevolently, "I forgive you, for I know that you only do this to earn your bread." He was right. The middle-aged Duchess presented Churchill with five thousand pounds, and Churchill, with characteristic shrewdness, immediately bought an annuity with the money.

On the other hand, the rivalry between Nell and Louise had soon become intense. During her visit to England in the retinue of Minette, Louise had instantly captivated the King. Now—according to Bishop Burnet—Buckingham “assured the King of France that he could not reckon himself sure of the King [Charles], but by giving him a mistress that should be true to his [Louis’s] interests. It was soon agreed to. So the Duke of Buckingham sent her [Louise] with a part of his equipage to Dieppe.” There, amazingly enough, he left Louise stranded, having entirely forgotten about her, but in due time a less absent-minded pilot brought her to England.

For some while she pretended to such high virtue as to be utterly unable to comply with Charles’s wicked suggestions. Moreover, she exasperated the English by “her magnificent tastes . . . her rather ostentatious virtue . . . and her overwhelmingly distinguished manners.” She had also, of course, the grave defect of being a Catholic. A little later, however, one of the French ambassadors was able to report home that “it is certain that the King of England shows a warm affection for Mademoiselle de K  roualle,* and perhaps you have heard from other sources that a richly furnished lodging has been given her at Whitehall. His Majesty repairs to her apartment at nine every morning, and never stays there less than an hour, and sometimes two. He remains much longer after dinner, shares at her card-table in all her stakes and never allows her to want anything. . . . I believe I can assure you that if she had made sufficient progress in the King’s affection to be of use in some way to His Majesty [Louis], she will do her duty.” In a short time she made gratifying progress. John Evelyn, for instance, writing of a

* The old family-spelling of the name.

house-party at which he had himself been present, noted that "it is universally reported that the fair lady was bedded one of these nights, and the stocking flung, after the manner of a married bride. I acknowledge that she was for the most part in her undress all day, and that there was a fondness and toying with the young wanton. . . . It is with confidence believed that she was first made a Miss, as they call these unhappy creatures, with solemnity at the time." How thoroughly she had done her duty, as the French ambassador conceived of it, is revealed in a letter which Madame de Sévigné sent to her daughter toward the end of March 1672. Madame, who preferred Nell Gwyn, stated that "the upshot is that she is with child. Is it not all astonishing? Castlemaine is in disgrace. England truly is a droll country."

The rumour was well founded. On July the 29th Louise gave birth to a son. In the course of the next year she asked the French King for permission to naturalise herself. Louis consented, and on August the 19th, 1673, Louise was created Baroness Petersfield, Countess of Fareham and Duchess of Portsmouth (the title by which she became best known). She was also appointed, with graceless irony, a Lady of the Queen's Bedchamber. Nell, who had, as we have seen, a post that was equally inappropriate, would not have resented this appointment, but the titles which Charles was now bestowing upon Louise were undoubtedly a cause of bitter jealousy and hot annoyance to her rival. Louise, on the other hand, could see no limit to her possible glory. In December 1673 the Queen fell dangerously ill, and for some days Louise could talk of nothing else and could hardly endure the suspense. Her disappointment when the Queen recovered was equalled only by the thankfulness of everyone else.

During this period of his life—the early 'forties—Charles gave other proofs of his remarkable vitality. As an exile he had been hospitably entertained by the Prince of Neuberg. The new Prince now paid a visit to London, coming at a season when the weather was magnificent. Charles, who (as Bryant shows) had a much keener sense of early kindness than some historians would have us believe, decided to welcome the son of his old friend with a really splendid party. He gave orders for a great dinner and dance in the Queen's apartments. After the dinner the company—the most brilliant in appearance that London could produce—danced for a long while, and although the dances were statelier than ours, the means of illumination—candles and torches—were considerably hotter. The atmosphere became dense and foul; some of the ladies were not far from fainting; and at length Charles, feeling the oppression of his massive wig, decided that the whole party should adjourn to St. James's Park. Out went the satin ladies, out went the ruffled gentlemen, thankful indeed for the moonlight and the comparatively cool air. Out went the musicians, too, with their flutes, their hautboys, their violins, and grouping themselves under the motionless trees, added the sweetness of their courtly music to the visible beauty of pale shoulders and faces, of bowing or curtsying figures.

Perhaps there has never been so lovely a picture in St. James's Park. In that age people often began their day, as Milton did, at sunrise, and late hours were not so late as they are now; but Charles's guests continued to dance and laugh, to tease and flirt, and sometimes to cool their throats with wine, until the London watchmen were announcing midnight. Some of the guests were probably beginning to flag, to yawn secretly, to wish that they were in bed; but the King was in one of his irrepressible

moods, and no sooner had midnight come than he ordered men to unmoor the royal barge—"luxuriously upholstered in rose-coloured brocade." Choosing the liveliest of his companions, and therefore including Nell, he bade them follow himself and the Prince of Neuberg into the barge. Reinvigorated by the moving air about them, they chatted gaily as the rowers pulled them up the river, past hundreds of dim meadows and drowsing trees, to the landing-stage at Hampton Court. They arrived there at daybreak, and within a few minutes the old palace was alive again with servants and serving-maids, grumbling, grinning, rubbing their eyes, hurriedly adjusting their costumes as they went, and generally bestirring themselves to play their parts in this latest whim of their good-humoured master.

Everyone in the party was long past the hour of sleepiness. The morning air made them, indeed, abnormally wide-awake. Charles was a devout fisherman—one whose enthusiasm apparently surpassed both his luck and his skill—and it was he, no doubt, who suggested that they should now fish. The fish, however, were more sleepy than the fishermen—or else the fishermen and the ladies were too high-spirited to stop talking. The King caught nothing but a minnow, nor was the Prince of Neuberg much better rewarded. The night of gaiety looked as though it would peter out in a somewhat dreary anti-climax, with a group of irritated fishermen and bored ladies wishing, in the early sunlight, that they had left well alone and gone back to their beds in the dark hours. That, at least, is evidently what Nell foresaw. She decided, therefore, that she must do something. Charles, leaving his line in the water, sauntered away to see if anyone else had fared better. The Prince, too, abandoned his line, and he and Charles must have moved off together—perhaps

to find something to eat and drink. That was Nell's opportunity, and she took it. When the Royal pair came back, intent upon returning to London, Nell suddenly pointed, her eyes all excitement, at the curve of Charles's rod. "But look, Charles, look!" she exclaimed; "at last you have really a catch! And so," she added, "so has His Highness!" Charles gripped his rod, drew the line in and saw with astonishment, as the end came out of the river, that a handful of dried smelts were dangling there by a silken thread. "What is there strange in that?" asked Nell. "Subjects must catch their fish alive, but a King should find his fish ready cooked." As for the Prince, his line was so heavy that he had to land his catch with all possible care and skill. At length, having drawn it up, he found that it was a golden purse ornamented with precious stones, and when he opened the purse he discovered inside it a miniature of a lady who, if Nell Gwyn could guess rightly, had captivated his eyes.

XXVII

THE CHARGEABLE LADIES (1674)

CHARLES observed on one occasion that "it is better to be a poor King than no King at all." Poor he certainly was. We cannot blame the House of Commons for having kept him short of money when we realise how much of his revenue he lavished upon women: and it is hard to imagine how he would have satisfied his pleasure and the demands of the women who provided it if he had not received such vast sums from the King of France. We need not be Puritans in order to feel that he had no right to squander the nation's money upon so long a procession of bedfellows, but we must be severe moralists indeed if we do not see that there is something creditable in his effort to support even those of them in whom he had no longer a live interest.

With the possible exception of Moll Davis, Nell was, it seems, the least money-greedy. A letter written by the poet, Andrew Marvell, on December the 19th, 1674, shows the disparity between the sums taken by Nell and by Louise. Charles granted to Louise the wine licences which, according to Marvell, brought her £10,000 a year. Louise, again, in a single year received the staggering sum of £136,668—and no wonder! She was then building a new house, or palace, and so exacting was her taste that she could not be satisfied until she had built it three times. Nell, it is true, was richly feathering her nest in Pall Mall, though "the share which Nell received out of a gross total of more than half a million was inconsiderable compared with the

huge amounts paid to other Royal favourites.”* At first, as Burnet has told us, she asked for only £500 a year, probably thinking of it as a fortune by comparison with her theatre salary. Later, so Marvell says, Charles settled £4,000 a year, as well as estates, upon Nell and her children, and five years afterwards added a further £1,000. Of course, he also gave her dresses and jewellery or money presents with which to buy them. Burnet, who calls her “the indiscreetest and wildest creature that ever was in a Court,” states that during the first four years of their association Charles spent £60,000 upon her. Moll, very likely, had to make both ends meet with her annual pension of £1,000; but Barbara Villiers never ceased to absorb vast quantities of gold, and there were, of course, numbers of more impermanent mistresses who were still holding out their hands. For many years, even when he could least afford to do so, Charles had continued to send money to Lucy Walters, the mother of Monmouth, one of Charles’s earliest women, a ruined Royalist’s daughter, a brown, beautiful, bold but insipid creature, whose weak, vain, drifting temperament she had evidently transmitted to her beautiful and foolish son. She, however, had gone from bad to worse, and so early as 1656 had “narrowly escaped being drummed out of the Hague as an infamous woman.”† Charles had ceased for some time to support her, and so kindly disposed was he toward women that any fair-minded student will assume that he abandoned her in desperation and with regret.

In 1674 Nell Gwyn had clearly become a person of importance and was already well known for her charity toward those who were less lucky than she.

* Dasent.

† Bryant.

It would not be too much to say, as later evidence will prove, that the harder anyone's lot might be the more instant was her response. In this year Thomas Duffet anticipated the impulse of several other writers by dedicating to her his play *The Spanish Rogue*. The least conventional passage in his dedication is the well-meant but ambiguous phrase that "doing good is not your nature but your business." To do good was, no doubt, her "nature," but she did seem also to make it her "business." This dedication would cost her perhaps not more than £50, but even this little sum would be drawn indirectly from the King's coffers. By this time no one will be surprised to hear that Charles was groaning over the state of his finances. In a letter written on March the 4th, 1675, we find that Nell, making a jest of his perturbation, told him how he could put them right. His Parliament, she said, was about to assemble, and if he wanted to extract more money from it he ought to treat Parliament "as a French ragout, a Scotch collop and a Calf's head." The only light upon this quip which we can derive from historians is the statement that the ragout represented Louise, the collop Lord Lauderdale and the Calf's head Lord Sunderland: but even so the jest may seem to those who are not clairvoyant impenetrably obscure. Charles, however, is said to have relished it mightily, and he must have found money under some stone which he had left unturned, for in February 1675 he gave Nell £1,000, in March he gave her £1,500—and £2,000 to Louise—and finally granted Nell the sum of £16,000.

XXVIII

SOCIAL GLORY (1675)

SHE had never lost her love of the theatre, and was probably at all times a constant playgoer. Somewhat surprisingly, we learn that she had to pay—at least when she visited the Duke's House. In the summer of 1675 she saw *King Lear*, but no hint of her opinion has survived, and there is more significance in the fact that between September and December 1674 she went four times to see *The Tempest*—a clear indication that many people have underrated her literary sense and natural good taste. It is true that she saw (presumably) the play as it was refashioned by Dryden and the enthusiastic Sir William Davenant, a version which Pepys had described, in 1667, as "the most innocent play that ever I saw; and a curious piece of music in an echo of half sentences, the echo [Ariel] repeating the former half, while the man [Ferdinand] goes on to the latter; which is mighty pretty. The play," he continues, "has no great wit, but yet good, above ordinary plays."* Nell, in fact, had not been friends to no purpose with Sedley, Buckhurst and Dryden.

Her life now was for the most part a half-serious and half-comical duel with Louise—a duel which was very soon to develop into a triangular fight. Nell and Louise were as different as a rose and an orchid. The French mistress, well bred, well educated, self-solemn, fastidious, ostentatious, disdainful of the common people and a representative

* Pepys, we should remember, considered *Twelfth Night* "one of the weakest plays that ever I saw on the stage"; but the version which he saw may have been a calamitous adaptation.

of the eternal type which would sooner die than not be socially distinguished, was an ideal contrast to the informal, humorous and democratic English mistress who, quite possibly, might have told Charles to go to the devil if she had not genuinely loved him. The attitude of the public is apparent in a story which comes from the earlier part of the eighteenth century. A goldsmith of that time related how, when he was an apprentice, his master had been commissioned to make a service of plate for Louise, and how people used curiously to crowd into the shop to see how it was progressing. When they learned that it was for Louise and not, as they had supposed, for Nell, they never troubled, says the goldsmith, to conceal their disappointment and disgust. Another glimpse of the rivalry between the two women is afforded by Defoe, who says: "I remember that the late Duchess of Portsmouth [Louise] in the time of Charles the Second, gave a severe retort to one who was praising Nell Gwyn, whom she hated. They were talking of her wit and beauty, and how she always diverted the King with her extraordinary repartees, how she had a fine mien and appeared as much the lady of quality as anybody. 'Yes, madam,' said the Duchess, 'but anybody may know she has been an orange-wench by her swearing.'"

The situation and the contrast between the two was, in fact, admirably summed up by Madame de Sévigné in September 1675. A free rendering of her letter would run thus:

As for England—well, Mademoiselle Kéroualle has not been disappointed in any way. She intended to be the King's mistress, and so she is. With the full knowledge of the whole Court, he lodges with her almost every night. She has born a son who is acknowledged and who has been presented with two duchies. She is

amassing wealth, and she has made herself as much respected and feared as she could.

She did not expect, however, that a young actress on whom the King dotes would stand in her path: and she hasn't the power to get him away from her. He divides his time, his care and his virility between the two of them. The actress is no less head-in-the-air than the Duchess herself, insulting her, abusing her, making faces at her, frequently stealing the King away from her and boasting of the King's preference. She is young [25], rash, bold, effective and winsome. She sings, dances and acts her new part well. She too has a son by the King, and is anxious to have him acknowledged. She thinks of it all in this way: "The Duchess pretends to be a person of quality, and gives out that she is connected with the best families in France. Whenever any great personage dies, she puts herself into mourning. But if she is really a lady of quality, why does she stoop to become a courtesan? She ought to be ashamed. As for me, why, that is my profession, and I do not pretend to be anything more lofty. The King supports me, and up to the present I have kept faith with him. He has a son by me, and I hold that he ought to stand by the child—as I am sure that he will because he loves me every bit as much as he loves his Portsmouth." And it is this little person who gets the upper hand, annoying and embarrassing the Duchess exceedingly. For myself, I like these quaint characters.

Nobody was surprised, though many must have been jealous or exasperated, when Charles transformed Louise into the Duchess of Portsmouth, and Nell, though she had the good sense to realise that Charles would risk danger if he were to ennoble her, resented the exaltation not only of Louise but also, and probably much more, the fact that Louise's three-year-old son was made Duke of Richmond. That was too much for her maternal instinct, and on one occasion she burst out with "even Barbara's brats were not made dukes until they were twelve

or thirteen, but the son of a French spy is given that title when he is hardly out of his long clothes!" She lost little time in letting Charles know how she felt, and the manner in which she did so was the most certain to prevail with him. On a day when she, Charles and their elder son were together in a room Nell called out to the child, "Come here, you little bastard!" "But, Nelly," said Charles, "why do you call him that?" "Why," she retorted, "because I have no better name to give him." And on December the 27th, 1676, Charles, that somewhat peculiar Fount of Honour, created the little boy Baron Heddington and Earl of Burford.

We may doubt whether Nell had the temerity to speak of Louise in Charles's presence by the nickname of Squintabella, though that is the name by which she referred to her rival in general company. Louise had, it is true, a slight cast, but Charles might have resented the nickname. He certainly would not have resented, and would have immensely enjoyed, an incident of this period which forms one of the more spectacular engagements in the long-drawn battle of pin-pricks between the two women. News came to London that the King of Sweden had died. On the following day everyone in the Court was astonished and concerned to see that Louise had gone into mourning. The temptation of saying that she was a relative of the late King had been too strong for her, and the temptation of making her ridiculous was much too strong for Nell. Fortunately, the King of Portugal died in the nick of time, and Nell immediately dressed herself in black and drove everywhere in a coach bedizened with the signals of mourning. At the first opportunity, and amidst a large and conventionally sympathetic assembly, she explained her behaviour by saying to Louise: "Let us divide the world. You

shall have all the Kings of the north, but leave me all the Kings of the south.”* Indeed, poor Louise was never allowed to do anything without being made absurd. No sooner, for instance, had she sat for her portrait, reclining upon a mossy bank and wearing only a chemise, than Nell, by some device getting possession of the same chemise, had herself painted in an equally exposed condition.

Although she could not vie with the wealthier Louise in sheer splendour, she was now decidedly living in the grand style. Apparently she sent some of her bills to the Exchequer Office, where they were paid, we must assume, from money that was due to her and that she was calling up in advance. One of these accounts (they were discovered a few years ago) supplies at once endearing evidence of her charity and a delightful glimpse of her wardrobe. It refers (I quote from the appreciative Dasent) to “white satin petticoats, red satin nightgowns, a fine ‘landskip’ fan, scarlet satin shoes embroidered with silver lace, a pair of shoes laced with gold for ‘Master Charles,’ and alms to poor men and women.” Another chronicler adds that the bill included “Kilderkins of strong ale, ordinary ale, a ‘barrel of eights’; oats, beans and oranges at threepence a-piece.” The same source gives us good reason to suppose that old Mrs. Gwyn had been living for some time at Pall Mall, for one of the documents is an apothecary’s bill for “plasters, glysters and cordials” despatched for the benefit of Nell’s mother. Then, too, in January 1675 Nell had bought not only a sedan-chair but also a coach—and to own a coach was a definite landmark in social progress. The coach, moreover, was worthy of anyone except Royalty or Barbara Villiers, for it was drawn by

* In another version of this story Charles is reported to have put this proposition to the two ladies.



NELL GWYN AND HER TWO SONS
British Museum

SOCIAL GLORY

four horses. On its panels it bore her initials "E. G." and "probably the coat-of-arms which had been found for her by an obliging herald painter."*

The grandeur of the sedan-chair can best be visualised by examining the bill for it:†

	£	s.	d.
The body of the chaire	3	10	0
The best neat's leather to cover the outside	3	10	0
600 inside nailes, coulered and burnisht	0	11	0
600 guilt with water gold at 5s. per cent	1	10	0
1,200 outside nailes, the same gold at 8s. per cent	4	16	0
300 studds, the same gold	1	16	0
2,000 halfe rooffe nailes, the same gold	1	14	0
200 toppit nailes, same gold	3	14	0
5 sprigs for the top, rich guilt	4	0	0
A haspe for the door, rich guilt	1	10	0
ffor change of 4 glasses	2	0	0
2 pound 5s. for one new glasse, to be abated out of that ffor a broken glasse 15s.	1	10	0
ffor guilding windows and irons	1	5	0
serge ffor the bottom	0	2	0
canvisse to put under the leather	0	8	0
all sorts of iron nailes	0	5	0
workmanshipe, the chair inside and outside	2	10	0
	34	11	0

Reict. dated 13 July, 1675, for £30 in full discharge.

Seeing that she now had her own chair, she must also have had porters in her house. It is therefore difficult to understand why she should have employed, not infrequently, a public chairman, but that she did so is proven by a bill which, to anyone who can see much in little, is of interest at various points. Possibly she was good-natured enough to forgo her own chair, now and again, in order that

* Dasent.

† Cited by Lewis Melville.

PRETTY WITTY NELL

her sick mother might use it. The bill for carrying Nell is as follows:

	£	s.	d.
1. For carrying you to Mrs. Knight's and to Madam Young's and to Madam Churchill's and waiting four hours	0	5	0
2. For carrying you the next day and waiting seven hours	0	7	6
3. For carrying you to Mrs. Knight's and to Mrs. Cassell's and to Mrs. Churchill's and to Mrs. Knight's	0	4	0
4. For carrying one Lady Sandys to the play at Whitehall, and waiting	0	3	6
5. For carrying you yesterday and waiting eleven hours	0	11	6
	<hr/>		
The sum is	1	11	6
	<hr/> <hr/>		

13th October, 1675

Received then of Tho. Groundes in full of these Bills and all other demands

£2 0 0

From Madam Gwynne, by me William Calow.

It is significant that Nell paid the bill "then"—that is, on the day that Calow presented it—for no one who has experienced the normal neglectfulness of the rich will think it fanciful to see in this promptness a hint that Nell remembered that to a poor person quick money may be a necessity. Again, the "Mrs. Cassell's" in item 3 is assuredly Rose Gwyn, and we see therefore that Nell had not only adopted her mother (at considerable social inconvenience), but was also in close touch with her sister. "Madam Churchill" has been reasonably identified with the sister of the young soldier whose name was to terrify the children of France, and with as good reason we may assume that "Mrs.

Knight" was Moll Knight who had been famous as a singer when Nell was seventeen. As for the item concerning "Lady Sandys" (presumably the wife of the man who had slit Sir John's nose), it suggests that Nell must have been engaged to attend a command performance of "the play at Whitehall"; that Lady Sandys, being present when the hour had come for Nell to set out, had said how greatly she would like to go too; that Nell had sent one of her servants with a message to Calow, and that she had refused to let Lady Sandys pay for the chair. The long hours which Calow "waited" (at a diminishing cost as they went by) can only be accounted for, I think, by supposing that these ladies were making up interminable basset-parties. In the third item, for example, we can picture Nell visiting Moll Knight on some other pretext, how they decided on the spur of the moment to arrange a card-party, and how Nell volunteered to bring her sister and Madam Churchill back to Mrs. Knight's: for since Calow did not wait outside, on this occasion, it is clear that Nell can only have been whipping up her boon companions.

Gambling and dancing were the chief amusements of the Court circle, but Nell is said to have been generally a loser at cards. Once, indeed, she lost £1,400 at a sitting: but her sense of money was too rudimentary for the loss to have troubled her greatly. And at this time, too, she was so wealthy that she could have risked an even larger sum. She had paid, for instance, £900 for a bedstead. It was a magnificent object, being made wholly of silver and weighing more than two thousand ounces. The ornamentation including figures of slaves, figures of cupids, eagles, crowns, the King's head and a representation of Jacob Hall, the rope-dancer, on a silver wire. If Hall was the dancer whom Charles

had recommended as a suitable lover to Barbara Villiers, this little image of him must have been commissioned as the result of some jest between Charles and Nell. The entire bill of the silversmith, one John Coques of Pall Mall, amounted to £1,135 3s. 1d., and includes silver andirons, a sugar castor, a pepper pot, a mustard pot, two "Kruyzes" (? cruets), a gold hour-glass, and two large silver bottles. It was now, also, that she ordered one of her rooms to be completely walled with mirrors, and this in an age when, as we see from Calow's bill, glass was really expensive. Nell unquestionably revelled in all this beauty and pomp, but nothing could suppress the puckish humour within her, and a certain warming-pan was a more characteristic possession. She had caused it to be engraved with the words "Fear God, serve the King."

Early in 1676 Louise was thrown into a state of the utmost apprehension, and even Nell must have wondered whether at last she might fall to the condition of Moll Davis. A new and formidable rival had set Whitehall in a flutter by her dark and sumptuous beauty.

XXIX

THE ROMAN CONQUEST (1676)

"SHE was one of those Roman beauties who in no way resemble your dolls of France. Her eyes have a nameless colour that is not blue nor gray nor altogether black. They have the sweetness of blue, the gaiety of gray and, above all, the fire of black. There are no eyes in the world that are as sweet, and none so serious and so grave when her thoughts are occupied with serious matter. They are large, well-set, full of fire and intelligence.

"All the movements of her mouth have charm, and the queerest grimaces become her wonderfully when she is imitating those who make them. Her smile would soften the hardest heart and lighten the profoundest dejection of mind." Saint-Evremond, who wrote this panegyric, proceeds to extol the lady's nose, voice, hair and complexion; and although his manner resembles that of an enthusiastic estate-agent, she deserved the highest encomium which he could pronounce. It may have been his appreciative assessment of Hortense which caused Charles to give him a decorative and un-exacting post as Keeper of the King's Ducks (in St. James's Park).

Hortense Mancini, as the reader may remember, was a fortunate niece of Cardinal Mazarin. By 1676 she had been for some years the very type of superb adventuress. Having cut loose from her fantastic husband, the Duc Mazarin, she had travelled from country to country and from Court to Court, mowing down noblemen and princes wherever she appeared. And now she had drifted to England

because her latest protector, the King of Savoy, had died; nor did she omit to stage-manage her arrival with an effective sense of what is picturesque and dramatic. She "rode to Charles's Court arrayed like a gentleman of fashion, with half a dozen retainers, a penniless exchequer, and a most exotic little black page."* The chief, if not the sole, duty of this little page was to make coffee for his mistress.

The portrait of Hortense by Pierre Mignard shows that she was a magnificent woman with the body of an Olympian and a head that would have kindled admiration in any country of Europe at any period. Here indeed was a terrifying rival to Louise. Moreover, Louise knew well enough that, in addition to everything else, this Roman would appeal to whatever remained of sentiment in Charles and to that sense of early, richer and lost emotions which may perturb any middle-aged man when he is unexpectedly brought again into contact with the experiences of youth: for when he too had been a penniless exile, wandering hither and thither on the Continent, he had wanted to marry Hortense, had actually asked for her hand, and had been rejected by Cardinal Mazarin as not being a good enough match.

She had now come to England for the express purpose of enchanting him anew, and of extracting from him the support which she was accustomed to receive from powerful and adoring personages. Charles, naturally, desired her at first sight, and Hortense made no pretence of yielding reluctantly to a regrettable male impulse. On March the 12th the French ambassador, anxiously studying the oscillations of Charles's taste, wrote to King Louis: "I have just learned that there is a definite and secret

* Bryant.



HORTENSE MANCINI TELLING THE FORTUNE OF HER SISTER

By Pierre Mignard Windsoi Castle

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understanding between the King of England and the Duchess Mazarin. She manages her intrigue with him very quietly: and those who had hoped to share in her triumph have not yet been able to do so." Charles's desire was, in fact, so obvious that Louise prepared instantly for the worst. Nell Gwyn had been tiresome, of course; but Louise had felt confident that the King would never allow an amusing foul-mouthed little actress to detach him from so fine a lady as herself. Hortense, on the other hand, was just as fine a lady, was very much more beautiful than she, and therefore gave Charles in even greater measure everything that she herself could give. Indeed, Louise was so greatly upset that she lost her head and foolishly opened the campaign by shutting herself up and sulking. Then, becoming ill with worry—and perhaps already with a malady less curable—she drove off to drink the waters at Bath. Next, coming back after a fretful month to see if all was irretrievably lost, she broke her journey to London at Windsor Castle and there dined with the King. To her intense annoyance he did not ask her to stay the night, and accordingly she drove onward to London in a rage. At Windsor she would certainly have made it her business to find out what was happening to Hortense, and the news was not reassuring. Charles had installed the Roman in a suite in St. James's.*

In August 1676 the French ambassador reported to Paris in the following unhappy sense: "Yesterday evening I witnessed an incident which aroused in me the greatest pity imaginable. It would perhaps have touched even you, wise and virtuous though

* In *The London Gazette* for May 1678 Hortense, having lost a dog in the Park, advertised for it to be returned to her at St. James's Palace.

you are. I went to Madame de Portsmouth's [Louise's] apartments. She opened her heart to me, and this in the presence of her waiting-maids. The two maids remained, with downcast eyes, close to the wall, while their mistress shed a torrent of tears, her sighs and sobs interrupting the words that she uttered. . . . I remained with her until midnight, and neglected no means of restoring her courage and of making her realise how much it was in her interest to dissemble her woe." Four months later the situation had become exceedingly tangled, and Charles had considerable difficulty in steering a happy course among his three leading ladies. "He had," says the ambassador, "to face the fury of the Duchess of Portsmouth for drinking twice within twenty-four hours to the health of Nell Gwyn, with whom he still frequently sups and who still makes the Duchess a butt for her irritating sarcasms." As for the Duchesse Mazarin [Hortense], the same observer informs us that Charles regularly went through the elaborate ceremony of going to bed at Whitehall, and that as soon as his gentlemen and servants had left the room, he got up, dressed himself, stole away to St. James's Palace, where he arrived when Hortense's gambling-parties had broken up, and did not return to Whitehall until after five in the morning. "It is evident, then," says a sage commentator, "that he did not spend his nights with Louise. He went often to see her when he knew that she had company; but that was all."

At this very time (December 1676) Charles, as already recorded, made Nell's "little bastard" an earl. Perhaps he would have done so earlier if Louise had influenced him less, and Nell may have been adroit enough to angle for the title at this moment because she realised that the chief opponent to the

ennobling of her children had now lost power. Nell certainly behaved with surprising confidence. She must have known that her position with Charles was unique, and that no woman or goddess could estrange him from her for more than a day or two. Far from sulking or from declaring war upon Hortense, she was delighted—delighted that at last someone had toppled the overbearing and contemptuous Louise into the dust. How gaily she took the situation, and with how little alarm, is shown by her arrival at Court one day, dressed in full mourning. In answer to the enquiries of the mystified courtiers she explained that she was mourning for the death of Louise's hopes. By this time, too, even Louise had grasped the nettle. She saw that Charles was not touched but thankful when she sulked and would not come out of her mansion. She had discovered, in fact, that tears only depress a lost lover and that anger only hardens him; and forcing her way through the most humiliating emotions which can beset a vain and shallow woman, she capitulated. Nevertheless, she did not intend that her first meeting with Hortense should occur before hundreds of hostile eyes at a Court in which nobody liked her. In 1676, however, nothing went right for Louise.

As soon as Hortense had heard that Nell's little Charles had been made an earl, she went to Pall Mall in order to offer her congratulations. In due course Nell called at St. James's Palace to thank her for this courtesy. She may have been somewhat surprised, as she must have been greatly amused, to find that Hortense was entertaining the French ambassador. He had gone there, perhaps, to give much-needed moral support to Louise, for a few minutes after Nell's arrival the footman opened the drawing-room doors and announced the Duchess of

Portsmouth. It is easy to picture the ceremonial curtseys interchanged by the three great ladies, English, French and Italian, fantastically linked as they were by having all been playfellows of the King: to conceive of the apprehension with which the ambassador made his bow; to catch the twinkle in Nell's eyes, the curiosity in those of Hortense, the microscopical scrutiny in Louise's; and to hear the gracious and almost imperceptibly condescending compliments which came from Hortense, the proprietary tones of Louise's references to the King, the intentional irrelevancies of Nell: nor shall we take too large a liberty if we sympathise with the ambassador, who was on tenterhooks lest Nell should not be able to resist the opportunity of infuriating Louise, or with Nell herself, who despite her social training, could never have been happy when she was controlling her impulsive tongue. Louise, who may not have fully recovered from her indisposition, had no stomach for a long interview and was, injudiciously, the first to say that she must go. Hardly had the doors closed behind her than Nell's pent-up irritation broke free. Turning to the disconcerted ambassador, she asked him point-blank, "Why does not your King send presents to me instead of lavishing them upon that Weeping Willow—poor dear! Sure, you must know that King Charles is a thousand times fonder of me than of her?" We are not told how the ambassador coped with the situation, but it may have been partly from tact that certain ladies who were also present diverted the conversation by expressing much curiosity with regard to Nell's underclothing. They had always heard, they said, that it was exceptionally fine. To this Nell answered, "Faith, ladies, look at it for yourselves," and posed happily while they examined the petticoats one by one. "And never,"

reported the ambassador, whose enthusiasm, considering his position, is readily comprehensible, "never in my life did I see such cleanliness, neatness and sumptuousness. I should speak," he adds, with a Frenchman's snigger, "of certain other things which were shown to all of us, if M. de Lionne were still Foreign Secretary: but with you, sir, I must be more grave and decorous."

When we look back to her theatre days and remember how Dryden then teased her for being a slattern, the ambassador's rhapsody over Nell's underclothes may startle us. According to Granger she remained "negligent in her dress even after becoming the King's mistress," but by this time court life had evidently refined her tastes and manners without impairing the outline of her personality: just so far, in fact, as, if we were her contemporaries, we should probably desire.

Hortense was now, at thirty, on the meridian of her glamorous beauty: for her beauty was of a type that endures, and a contemporary may not have been far wrong when he said that she would still be as beautiful at fifty. One of the very first people who succumbed to her was, by a strange irony, pretty little Lady Sussex, a daughter of Barbara Villiers, who had been expansively accepted by Charles as a child of his begetting. Lady Sussex, who was still in her teens, conceived a girlish infatuation for the grandeur that was Rome; and on one occasion, according to the ubiquitous French ambassador, she and Hortense danced, sang and played battledore and shuttlecock for the whole of a day. Barbara herself had long since accepted the fact that she had lost all influence with Charles, and in 1679 she transferred herself to Paris, and it is amusing to learn that Charles warned the Commissioners of the Treasury to keep a sharp look out. Barbara had lately lost, in

a single night while playing basset, £20,000 in cash and jewels, and, as Charles told them, she would probably "have a bout with them for money." Hortense, and even Nell, were not less reckless in their card-play. Hortense is said, for instance, to have won £4,000 from Nell at one sitting; but they and their circle lived on a scale so wildly extravagant that in our time we could find a parallel for it only in the most fantastic set of American millionaires. They certainly needed every additional thousand pounds which they could pick up. The two porters, six lackeys and negro page who formed Hortense's household wore liveries which had so much lace upon them that, as the French ambassador said, "the coats are quite hidden by it." He adds, with a simplicity which cannot have been intended to deceive King Louis, "I do not know how she does it, but these extraordinary expenses appear to me a little suspicious." It is, indeed, surprising to find that Charles fobbed off his Roman mistress with a mere house in Chelsea and a pittance of £4,000 a year;* but although in this way he left her largely dependent upon her luck at basset, she was well enough pleased to remain in England even after his death had disturbed the equanimity of all "the chargeable ladies about the Court." We may assume that he never went so far as to cross her name off his list. Nevertheless, in a shorter time than we should expect, she seems to have lost her leading position among his bedfellows and to have taken her place in the chorus. Nell remained in the foreground of his interest, and even affection, by virtue of her goodness of heart, frank ways, natural charm and genuine love for him. If she had still to contend with Louise, the truth may well be that in order to main-

* Agnes Strickland.

THE ROMAN CONQUEST

tain the flow of French gold into his gaping exchequer, Charles knew that it was necessary to encourage the belief of the French king that Louise could influence him in political matters and find out his undiscoverable secrets.

XXX

*SHE INTERVENES FOR THE DUKE OF
BUCKINGHAM (1677)*

IN those days a girl of twenty-seven, especially one who was the mother of two boys, probably thought of herself as a middle-aged matron; for small-pox, syphilis and the insanitary conditions of the towns and cities killed off all but the toughest people before life had run more than half its course. In another three years Rochester was to die, at the age of thirty-two, from the effects of intensive drinking and whoring; and only exceptional constitutions could have preserved Etheredge, Sedley, and Buckhurst to the respective ages of fifty-six, sixty-two and sixty-eight.

Nell at least had arrived at a phase of life in which she actually resented a practical joke that might, at one time, have seemed to her just cheerfully silly. Henry Killigrew, a son of the Killigrew with whom she had been so long and so luckily associated, yielding one night to that tendency in the man of forty to stimulate his flagging vitality, had remained drinking for so long that, in the small hours, he began to feel as though he were twenty again. At three in the morning he realised that he was inspired: and a notion entered his mind that seemed to him so extremely humorous that he would not be playing fair with a world that needed fun if he did not put it into practice. Accordingly, he reeled his way through the silent streets and past two or three indulgent or timid old watchmen, until he arrived at 79 Pall Mall. He had now become really exuberant, and so pleased with himself for having found the

right house, that he battered on the door so violently and shouted so heartily that the porters, rubbing their eyes and wondering if another great fire had broken out, opened the door and, recognising one of their mistress's acquaintances, admitted him. Meanwhile Nell also had waked, and seeing that it was now four o'clock, was greatly alarmed by the extraordinary noise in her house. She came downstairs, clad in one of her red satin nightgowns, and was astonished to see Henry Killigrew. She asked him what strange business could have brought him there at that hour of the night, and Killigrew, releasing his joke at last, replied that the King had sent him to inform her that the Duchess of Portsmouth had now recovered from a recent sickness. Nell, with her long experience of drunken men, very speedily realised his condition and immediately ordered him to leave her house. The letter-writer who records this incident informs us that Killigrew "rallied her with his abusive tongue extreemly," but we can be quite certain that from Nell, who was now awake and angry, he got better than he gave. At length, disappointed in the effect of his joke, he rolled homeward, but even the cold light of morning had not its traditional influence upon Nell's view of the episode. Someone—and presumably it was she—reported the matter to the King: and Charles could no more see the fun in it than she. In fact, he was highly annoyed about it, and went so far as to banish the silly drunkard, at least for a time, from his Court.

In February Nell was involved in an affair of much greater importance. For once, indeed, her life touched upon politics, but, as we might expect, this happened by way of friendship and the heart. The existing Parliament had continued to assemble for fifteen years—almost, in fact, from the time of Charles's

restoration—and in spite of a disinclination to vote him more money than the State could afford, it was still emphatically favourable to the King: but naturally, in the course of time a political party had grown up which criticised and opposed his management of affairs. This party, or group, was led by the celebrated Earl of Shaftesbury who figures, throughout the greater part of Charles's reign, as his most formidable opponent. The ruling classes were most sharply divided over the subject of England's attitude toward France: Shaftesbury and his colleagues desiring that we should not be supine but should take arms to prevent Louis from becoming virtually the master of Europe. Charles, as we know, preferred French money to a French war; and when he remarked that some day the English nation would bless him for having kept it so long at peace, he was probably expressing a sentiment quite as sincere as his wish to get from France the money which he could not get from Parliament. Among the most influential supporters of Shaftesbury was Nell's old acquaintance, or friend, the Duke of Buckingham: and the method by which the opposition party attempted to install a new Parliament that should be anti-French was to rely, as the lawyers have it, upon an ancient statute of Edward the Third's time whereby it was ordained that a Parliament should be convened "once a year or oftener if need be." Charles had not convened his Parliament, since he was getting money elsewhere, for eighteen months: but the flaw in Shaftesbury's contention was, according to Green,* that "the Triennial Act deprived it of any force." Charles's chief minister at this time was Danby: a gentleman who is said to have enjoyed the favours of Louise (no doubt for what she hoped

* *A Short History of the English People.*

to get out of him) and who had incurred the dislike of Nell Gwyn because, not unreasonably, he had always resisted any suggestion that an actress and a confessed courtesan should be given a noble title. Danby, seizing his chance, declared that the King's critics had been guilty of contempt towards the House of Commons; and in June he persuaded the House of Lords to commit Shaftesbury, Buckingham and two other noblemen to the Tower.

Buckingham had always been too restless, ambitious and turbulent to secure Charles's confidence. True, he had fought on the Royalist side in the Civil War, had supported the younger Charles at the battle of Worcester in 1651, and had shared in the exile that followed the victory of the Puritans; but he was always under suspicion of double-dealing with the enemy. He also annoyed Charles by openly courting Charles's sister. Eventually, however, he married a lady who was so deeply in love with him that she jilted another nobleman when the banns for her marriage with the latter had been twice called. She may well have regretted her early passion for Buckingham when, having seduced the Countess of Salisbury, he killed her husband in a duel at Barn Elms, and "installed the widow of his own creation in his own and his wife's house." When his wife said that she would not put up with this indignity, Buckingham merely replied: "So I thought, madam, and have therefore ordered your coach to convey you to your father." The French King might present Lady Shrewsbury with a pension of 10,000 livres, but English opinion, even in that time, was against Buckingham. Someone has well called him "the Alcibiades of his age," for the parallel of the two careers is remarkably close: and there is much evidence to show that Buckingham was as accomplished as his prototype. Reresby, for example, described

him as "the first gentleman of person and wit I think I ever saw," and Dean Lockier, having praised his skill in riding, dancing and fencing, states that "when he came into the presence-chamber it was impossible for you not to follow him with your eye as he went along, he moved so gracefully." Moreover, like so many high personages of the period, he was at times an admirable lesser poet. The following extracts from a poem to the Countess of Shrewsbury show his talent at its best.

What a dull fool was I
 To think so gross a lie
 As that I ever was in love before!
 I have perhaps known one or two
 With whom I was content to be
 At that which they call keeping company;
 But after all that they could do,
 I still could lie with more.
 Their absence never made me shed a tear,
 And I can truly swear
 That till my eyes first gazed on you,
 I ne'er beheld that thing I could adore. . . .

She that would raise a noble love must find
 Ways to beget a passion for her mind;
 She must be that which she to be would seem,
 For all true love is grounded on esteem.
 Plainness and truth gain a more generous heart
 Than all the crookéd subtleties of art.
 She must be—what said I? She must be You.
 None but yourself that miracle can do. . . .

And the lines which he wrote about her, when the House of Lords had extracted from him an undertaking, which he kept, not to cohabit with her again, are probably more sincere than his bondage to the literary manner of the age may cause them to seem now. "Of her bereft," he wrote:

SHE INTERVENES FOR THE DUKE OF BUCKINGHAM

I have no hope, no second comfort left.
If such another beauty I could find,—
A beauty, too, that bore a constant mind—
Ev'n that could bring no medicine for my pain:
I loved not at a rate to love again.

And, passing from amateur to professional verse, we find an expert delineation of his abilities and defects in Dryden's famous epitome of him as

Stiff in opinions, always in the wrong,
Was everything by starts and nothing long;
But in the course of one revolving moon,
Was chymist, fiddler, statesman and buffoon.
Beggared by fools, whom still he found too late,
He had his jest, but they had his estate.

The last line cannot have exaggerated the truth, for even at the time of Charles's death the Duke was in debt to the figure of £140,000.

This was not the first time that Buckingham had gone, as an inmate, to the Tower. He had been confined there twice before—on the second occasion for having cast the King's horoscope: the last instance, I believe, of regarding this act as a criminal offence. Many people were now sorry for Buckingham; and among the influential persons who pleaded with the King in his behalf was the Earl of Middlesex, whom most readers will more readily recognise by his earlier title of Lord Buckhurst. Charles, however, having routed his critics through Danby's bold enterprise, rejected all these petitions. It was at this moment in the affair that Nell Gwyn bestirred herself.

She was no angel. She was normal enough to have been inspired by a wish to annoy the man who prevented Charles from good-naturedly making her

a peeress and so bettering her position in the continual struggle with Louise: but there is good reason for supposing that she came to the rescue of Buckingham for another reason, also—because she liked him. She went to the Tower, and they had an effective interview. And she went there, armed with a mysterious letter which suggests that she may first have had an interview with Charles and that she had prevailed with him where Buckhurst and other great persons had been rebuffed. The letter, now in the British Museum, begins with the words: "The best woman in the world brings you this paper and, at this time, the discreetest": and the qualifying words "at this time" are an indication that the anonymous writer knew her well. "Pray, my lord," he continues, "resign your understanding and your interest wholly to her conduct. Mankind is to be redeemed by Eve, with as much honour as the thing will admit of. Separate your concern from your fellow-prisoner [Shaftesbury]; then an expedient handsome enough and secret enough to disengage you; obey, and you are certainly happy."

Buckingham was a born intriguer but he was not a man to suffer for his ideas, and he was only too thankful to seize an astonishing opportunity of getting away from the tedium of the Tower. Moreover, a suspicion that Charles was fully aware of Nell's undertaking is confirmed by a letter which Buckingham "either sent to the King or got Nell to take." In this we read "I am so surprised with what Mrs. Nelly has told me that I know not what in the world to say. . . . What you have been pleased to say to Mrs. Nelly is ten thousand times more than ever I can deserve." Buckingham was soon a free man; and in a gossiping letter, written in the September of this year, we can see not only that Nell now moved, as a friend, in the highest society, but also that her



GEORGE VILLIERS, DUKE OF BUCKINGHAM
Sir Peter Lely. National Portrait Gallery

talent for acting must have been innate. " 'Tis certain," says the writer, "that Buckingham passes a great part of his time with Nelly who, because the Lord Treasurer [Danby] would not strive to make her a Countess, is at perfect definance with him, so that the Treasurer's lady is there acted [i.e. mimicked at 79 Pall Mall] and the King looks on with great delight. . . . Monmouth takes sanctuary at that place, and has all manner of assistance which that place can afford, and all the promises of those that come near it."

Toward the end of the year there is further evidence that the episode of the Tower had fanned the friendship between Nell and Buckingham. The letter in which we find it shows also how crude was the language in use between great persons and how unattractive a big wig could sometimes be. Lucy Walter, the Duke of Monmouth's feckless mother, had born a daughter who was now twenty-six. Charles, unable to oblige everybody, refused to acknowledge the child. Even Monmouth, knowing his mother's frailty, regarded the young woman as merely his step-sister. And now she in turn had presented her husband with a daughter. Whom should they invite to become its godfather? The husband, writing on November the 1st (1667), "thinks the King ought to be kept for a son [that is to say, reserved to be godfather on a more important occasion] and the Duke of Monmouth," he continues, hopefully, "does not yet own the alliance enough to hold his niece at the font, and therefore I believe (that) that honour will at last fall upon his Grace of Buckingham. Mrs. Nelly, who is his great friend and faithful counsellor, advised him not to lay out all his stock upon the christening, but to reserve a little to buy him(self) new shoes, that he might not dirty her rooms, and a new periwig that

PRETTY WITTY NELL

she might not smell him stink two storeys high when he knocks at the outward door."

If a rumour reached her that Nell now teased a great nobleman in this vein, Madam Ross must have waxed exceedingly reminiscent.

XXXI

FLATTERING LETTER TO A GENTLEMAN (1678)

A FEW years earlier Charles having, according to Louise, inflicted upon her an injury which the modest Dasent cannot bring himself to specify, had soothed her with a diamond necklace and a rope of pearls which, together, were worth about £12,500. To compete in splendour upon that scale was beyond Nell Gwyn, but it may have been at this time that she bought a "crochet" of diamonds (perhaps a loop) of which she was not a little proud. If it was not news of the diamonds, then it was probably a rumour of her innumerable silver objects which, on a night of January in 1678, excited burglars to break into her house. They must have been fairly skilled men, for although they could not remove the £900 bedstead, they got away, in spite of her porters, with a small amount of plate. Nell immediately sent an advertisement, obviously not composed by herself, to *The London Gazette*. The advertisement runs: "All goldsmiths and others to whom our silver plate may be sold, marked with the cypher E.G., flourished, weighing about eighteen ounces, are desired to apprehend the bearer thereof, till they give notice to Mr. Robert Johnson, in Heathcock Alley, Strand, over against Durham Yard, or to Mrs. Gwin's porter in the Pell Mell, by whom they shall be rewarded."

If she did not recover her silver, she would certainly very soon have recovered her laughing equanimity; and when an earnest author, one Mr. Robert Whitcombe, presented himself and handed to her his magnum opus, *The Lives and Histories of*

the Heathen Gods, Goddesses and Demi-gods, she must have had difficulty in keeping a straight face (if she did keep it) while she read, or heard him tremblingly recite, the dithyrambic dedication. In this he ascribed to her "an illustrious troop of sublime thoughts" and "a great mind"—phrases which probably caused the landscape-fan to conceal her face; nor would she have accepted, even to the extent that we may, his reference to "that satisfaction and delight which none but a soul as large as your own is capable to conceive." It was, in fact, a pity that enthusiasm for his own ornate style should have betrayed Mr. Whitcombe into imagining the grandeur of Nell's mind or the sublimity of her thoughts; for he had been more successful when, before his pen ran away with him, he had laboriously stated: "I knew that curious Nature had extended her endeavours in the formation of your delicate body, and enjoined both it and every limb about you to an exact symmetry and pleasing proportion."

In the early summer of this year we come upon a sordid and somewhat complicated intrigue which reveals how even at this date Nell remained unexpectedly simple and astonishingly good-natured. We get wind of it from a letter which Henry Savile, a man who was evidently very fond of her, wrote to one of her best friends, Laurence Hyde, but his letter is so tortuously phrased that without a gloss it would be almost unintelligible. A certain Lady Harvey, who ought to have been in partnership with Madam Ross, had determined to better herself by providing the King with a new and exceedingly delectable mistress. We can see, in the National Portrait Gallery, how unusually attractive was the lady—Jane Myddleton—whom she had in mind. Some say that Jane's mother had long ago forestalled Lady Harvey, and had brought "Mrs. Jenny" to

Court, at the age of nineteen, with the definite purpose of enabling her to share in Charles's munificence to his mistresses. Indeed, scandal reported that Charles, James and even the Archbishop of Canterbury, had all pressed their suits upon her. Jenny, however, had more self-respect than was common in the Court circle. When, for example, the notorious memoirist Grammont began to pester her, she told him "to keep quiet and look elsewhere." She was something of a writer and something, too, of a painter; and although she was now thirty-three, she must have been as pretty as ever, for Lady Harvey felt confident that anyone who could bring her to the King's bed would be amply rewarded for the trouble.

Now, there was a certain Will Chaffinch, less charming than his name, who had acted for a long time as backstairs-chamberlain to Charles. He it was who brought women privily to the bedchamber. Lady Harvey seems not to have been acquainted with Chaffinch, and no doubt he was as inaccessible as any important wire-puller has always been and still is. However, she did know Nell Gwyn, and Nell Gwyn knew Chaffinch. Accordingly, Lady Harvey insinuated herself into Nell's easy affection. "Her Ladyship," wrote Savile, "having little opportunity of seeing Charlemagne [Charles] upon her own account, wheedles poor Mrs. Nelly into supping twice or thrice a week at W. Chaffinch's and carrying her with her. So that in good earnest this poor creature [Nell] is betrayed by her ladyship to pimp against herself, for there [at Chaffinch's] her ladyship whispers and contrives all matters to her own ends, as the other [Nell] might easily perceive if she were not too giddy to mistrust a false friend." Savile was seriously concerned about Nell's position in the affair. He says that she is playing a part "that makes

her now laughed at and may one day turn to her infinite disadvantage"—that is, of course, if Lady Harvey succeeded and if Jenny Myddleton were to set up in rivalry with Nell. The letter ends with a tangled sentence which is, nevertheless, one more indication of Nell's lovable nature. "This I thought it good for you to know," he concluded, "for . . . the friendship betwixt us ought to make me have an observant eye upon any accident that may wound any friend of yours as this may, in the end, do her [i.e. wound Nell], who is so much your friend and who speaks obliging and charitable things of me in my present disgrace."

The recipient of this letter was a notable man of the time. Laurence Hyde was, for example, a son of the sage Earl of Clarendon who had been for many years, both in exile and after the Restoration, as grave and excellent a political adviser as any that Charles ever had. Laurence had worked as an ambassador in Poland. At the present time (1678) he was one of our representatives at the conference which arranged the Peace of Nijmegen. He was, too, the man who, being removed from the Treasurership to "the more dignified but less influential post of President of the Council," is immortalised in the witty remark of Lord Halifax—that he had been "kicked upstairs." To the professional historian, therefore, he is a conspicuous figure in his own right. To the mere amateur of history he is a cause of confusion and irritation because in 1681 he became Earl of Rochester, adopting the title which we usually associate with the rake who died of his debauches in 1680. To the lover of Nell Gwyn, however, Laurence Hyde is an important and enviable person because it was to him that she sent one of her few existing letters: and although he is reported to have been bad-tempered and arrogant, no one

would suspect it from the tone in which she talks to him. I say "talks" because Nell never wrote a letter if she could avoid it. Instead, she employed a secretary, excusing the practice on the ground that her own "wild characters" would distress anyone who had to decode them. It is obvious that she dictated her letters line by line, so that in reading them we hear the very accent of her voice, can see the bubbling of her mind and are almost in touch with her living presence. Elsewhere I have modernised the spelling of old documents, but I think that here the fantastic spelling of Nell's secretary has a charm which ought not to be withheld from the reader. The letter runs thus:

Pray, Deare Mr. Hyde, forgive me for not writeing to you before now, for the reasone is I have bin sick thre months and sinse I recoverd I have had nothing to intertaine you withall, nor have nothing now worth writing, but that I can holde no longer to let you know I never have ben in any companie wethout drinking your health, for I love you with all my soule.

The pel mel is now for me a dismale place since I have utterly lost Sr. Car Scrope, never to be recoverd agane, for he tould me he could not live alwayes at this rate, and so begun to be a littel uncivil, which I could not suffer from an uglye *baux garscon*.

Mrs Knight's lady mother [*is*] dead, and she has put up a scutchin no beiger then my Lady Grin's scunchis.

My Lord Rochester is gone in the countrei.

Mr. Savil has got a misfortune, but is upon recovery and is to marry an hairess, who I think wont wont have an ill time of't if he hold up his thumb.

My Lord of Dorscit [Buckhurst] apiers worze in thre months, for he drinckes aile with Shadwell and Mr. Haris at the Duke's house all day long.

My lord Burford remembers his sarvice to you.

My Lord Baucldre is is goeing into France.

We are agoeing to supe with the King at Whithall and my lady Harvie.

PRETTY WITTY NELL

The King remembers his sarvis to you.

Now let's talke of state affairs, for we never caried things so cunningly as now, for we don't know whether we shall have peace or war, but I am for war, and for no other reason but that you may come home.

I have a thousand merry conseets, but I can't make her write them, and therefore you must take the will for the deed. God bye.

Your most loveing obedient, faithfull and humbel servant,

E. G.

The statement that she had been ill for three months has probably, as I hope to show in due course, an exceedingly sinister significance, for there is reason to think that she was not merely suffering from a negligible indisposition. . . . No one seems to have diagnosed the trouble between Nell and Sir Carr Scrope, a man about town, a minor poet and a boon companion of Charles the Second. Perhaps he was a constant loser at Nell's basset-parties, and now, having lost so much money that he had also lost his temper, he may have told Nell that he would not come again. The learned Dasent states that a "beau garçon" was a term equivalent to the Edwardian word "rotter"; but he must be mistaken, for Rochester says of someone that he "thinks himself a Beau-Garçon." Mrs. Knight is the singer, Moll Knight, who at one time had duly taken her place in the queue of Charles's pleasure-givers: and the allusion to the escutcheon refers, of course, to the custom of suspending on the wall of a house in which some person of rank had died a panel adorned with the dead person's coat-of-arms. The Lady Green, whose panel (or hatchment) had been so insignificant as to shock Nell's feeling for mortuary display, had also had intimate memories of the King. . . . Mr. Savile, with whom we are already acquainted, did

not marry his heiress. Indeed, he died unmarried. The puzzled Dasent tentatively suggests that the phrase "holding up his thumb" might allude to Savile's "intemperate habits"; but Nell was not squeamish, and a student of Roman erotic literature may suspect her of hoping, for the sake of the heiress, that Savile would not be too temperate in another way. . . . For the rest, it is only necessary to note that "my Lord Burford" and "my Lord Bauclaire," though they sound august, were only Nell's little boys Charles and James. . . . And why, we are left wondering, could Nell not make her secretary write those merry conceits? Was it for lack of time? Or was the secretary a little too fastidious? Be that as it may, no male reader of this ancient impromptu will fail to appreciate the perfume of delicious flattery that still breathes from the penultimate sentence.

XXXII

HER MOTHER'S HOGARTHIAN DEATH (1679)

IT is true that Nell did not meddle with politics. To a girl of her happy-go-lucky nature they were probably as tedious as arithmetic; and to one whose deepest instinct, in my belief, was maternal, the gravity and excitement with which her men friends expounded their political notions may have seemed childish and comical. Nell was a thousand times more interested in personalities than in doctrines or theories; and it must have been only a tolerant liking for Monmouth which caused her, on one occasion, to speak up for him. So far as we can divine, she cared nothing about anybody's morals; and she would not have thought the worse of Monmouth because, at one time, Charles—who always indulged his eldest son to a quite unpardonable extent—had signed a document exonerating Monmouth from “all Murders, Homicides and Felonies whatsoever at any time before the 28th of February last past committed either by himself alone or together with any other person or persons.” Again, Monmouth is usually considered to have instigated the affair of Coventry's Nose, in which Nell might have regarded him as in part her champion: and although he is also known to have murdered a London beadle in 1671, she probably looked upon the act as an aristocratic privilege. At the same time he was too pretentious to escape her delight in pricking bubbles. He may not have been pleased with his nickname “Perkin”: and if an old ballad was based upon truth we know that he once told her that she was ill-bred. To this Nell is alleged to have retorted: “And was

Lucy Walter [his mother] any better bred than I am?"

Still, she hated to see anybody unhappy; and during the summer of 1679 Monmouth was, politically, out of favour with the King. The truth is that Monmouth, infatuated by the popularity which his exceptional beauty aroused, and realising that the people did not want to see James, a Catholic, as their King, had begun to think that Charles ought to appoint him heir to the throne. And at this very time Charles fell sick, so that the question of the succession became of urgent interest. He resolutely championed James's right to succeed him as King of England, and in order to stop his son's absurd machinations he sent the young man northward to quell a small insurrection in Scotland. When Monmouth came back to London Charles continued to be decidedly chilly. There was, in fact, a definite estrangement between father and son. "Nell Gwyn," we find in *The Memoirs of the Verney Family*, "begged hard of His Majesty to see the Duke, telling him that he was grown pale, wan, lean and long-visaged merely because he was in disfavour, but the King bid her be quiet because he would not see him." Later in the year the new French ambassador reported that Monmouth "every night sups with Nelly"; and even twelve months later Charles felt so strongly upon the subject that he forbade Nell to let Monmouth come to her house.

Seeing that she now consorted so much with the persons who were struggling for power at the top of the realm, it is not surprising that a writer of remarkable talent, and perhaps of some genius, should have dedicated a book to Nell. The writer, this time, was the brilliant, plucky, hard-working and libidinous Mrs. Aphra Behn: the book was one of her plays, *The Feigned Courtesans*. Mrs. Behn's dedicatory

foreword has been ridiculed as an extreme example of the fulsome flattery which authors poured over their patrons in an age when the author's pecuniary reward came rather from the patron than from the "bookseller" or the public; but an unprejudiced jury might consider not only that Mrs. Behn's laudatory salute to Nell Gwyn is a piece of good English, but also that the sentiment in it rings true. "I with shame look back," she wrote, "on my past ignorance which suffered me not to pay an adoration long since where there was so very much due; yet even now, though secure in my opinion, I make this sacrifice" (i.e. offer up this book) "with infinite fear and trembling, well knowing that so excellent and perfect a creature as yourself differs only from the divine powers in this—the offerings made to you ought to be worthy of you, whilst they accept the will alone.

"Besides all the charms, the attractions and powers of your sex, you have beauties peculiar to yourself—an eternal sweetness, youth and 'air' which never dwell in any face but yours. You never appear but you gladden the hearts of all that have the happy privilege to see you, as if you were made on purpose to put the whole world in a good humour." To this she adds a passage which, as we know, misinterprets the fact that Nell had not been ennobled. "Heaven," says Mrs. Behn, "has bestowed upon you two noble branches, whom you have permitted to wear those glorious titles which you yourself generously neglected." Assuming that the two ladies were acquainted, Mrs. Behn had probably soon realised how much Nell resented her social inferiority to Louise, and is here trying to please her patron by informing the world that Nell remained a commoner by choice.

For Nell this summer of 1679 was in all ways a

troublesome time. The highwayman having perished at last, Rose Gwyn had married a born husband, a Mr. Forster. Some little time earlier Nell had persuaded Charles to give to herself and her sister certain monies that were raised in long-suffering Ireland. She had appointed a Mr. Mellish as her agent. She now complained to him that the money was very much in arrears: to which he replied that "there is a stop upon it." Here was a nasty jar for anyone as extravagant and as generous as Nell Gwyn, and it was with great anxiety that she reported the matter to the Auditor of the Exchequer. The Auditor wrote to the Lord Lieutenant, who was in Dublin, referring to "Mrs. Nelly" and pointing out that in order to balance her budget she needed urgently to know when the money would be paid up. Four months went by, while Nell and Rose became more and more desperate. Then, in a second letter, the Auditor hints plainly that Mr. Mellish appears to have stuck to some of the money. "Mrs. Nelly," he says to the Lord Lieutenant, "presents you with her real acknowledgements for all your favours, and protests that she would write in her own hand, but her wild characters would distract you." A little while afterwards the son of the Lord Lieutenant wrote to him from London. He reported that he had interviewed the Auditor about the missing money.

He also urged his father to do anything possible, within the law, to satisfy Nell "because I know the King is set on the thing, intending it as a settlement for my Lord of Burford." The Lord Lieutenant, writing from Dublin on Christmas Eve, assured his son that the business "is done so far as it depends on me." Nell, naturally, had dismissed the dubious Mr. Mellish: but two years later, as we shall find, she was again agitating for the payment of this Irish

pension. Mr. Mellish, therefore, may have been unjustly suspected.

The stars, when they fight against us, usually scatter their evil over a large surface of our lives. An adverse aspect in a horoscope is likely to hit us at several points: a fact which confirms the general experience that troubles do not come in single spies but in battalions. When Nell was twenty-nine everything seemed to go wrong. Her financial anxieties, for example, had only just begun when a trouble of much greater magnitude assailed her. In the summer of 1679 her mother died, and died in a woefully sordid manner. It seems that the elder Mrs. Gwyn had paid a visit to "the Neat Houses." They stood on the riverside at Millbank, to the west of Vauxhall Bridge, and they were famous not only for their connection with "a celebrated market-garden" but also as a place of refreshment. Mr. Pepys, for instance, had recorded how he had landed there "and bought a melon": again, how he "spoke with Knipp, who went abroad with us by coach to the Neat Houses in the way to Chelsea; and there, in a box in a tree, we sat and sang, and talked and ate; my wife out of humour, as she always is when this woman is by": and lastly, how he had gone "to one of the Neat-houses, where we walked in the garden, but nothing but a bottle of wine to be had, though pleased with seeing the garden."

Mrs. Gwyn, unfortunately, had discovered more than a bottle of wine, for the melancholy truth is that, having drunk herself into a stupor, she blissfully collapsed into a watery ditch and was speedily drowned. Etheredge, whose gloating Muse instantly inspired him, zealously described how

The pious mother of this flaming whore,
Maid, punk and bawd, full sixty years and more,
Died drunk with brandy in a common-shore . . .

HER MOTHER'S HOGARTHIAN DEATH

And Rochester, who surely ought to have sympathised with the bibulous departed, chose a strange theme for his sneers when he wrote:

Nor was the mother's funeral less her care;
No cost, no velvet, did the daughter spare:
Fine gilded 'scutcheons did the herse enrich,
To celebrate the Martyr of the Ditch . . .

Nor should we trust him too literally when he describes the after-celebrations:

Burnt brandy did in flaming Brimmers flow,
Drunk at her Funeral; while her well-pleas'd Shade
Rejoyc'd, e'en in the Sober Fields below,
At all the Drunkenness her Death had made.

Nothing, it is clear, had overlaid or weakened Nell's natural instincts, and she had always retained an irrational devotion to her mother. It was a queer society which could make fun of her for giving the old lady as handsome a funeral as she could contrive.

XXXIII

WORRY AND GRIEF (1680)

CHARLES took a lively interest in his children by Nell. We have seen, in her letter to Hyde, that "my Lord Bauclore," her smaller son James, was about to go abroad. It was obvious that her elder son, being a lord, would require a better education than his mother, as an orange-girl, had been able to obtain; and it may be indicative of a certain real taste for literature that Nell should now, they say, have appointed the last of our notable tragic dramatists, ill-starred Thomas Otway, to tutor her ten-year-old Charles. In *An Essay of Scandal* we read:

Then for that cub, her son and heir,
Let him remain in Otway's care,

and it is reasonable to guess that if Nell's finances had not become so tangled Otway would not have died five years later, or at least would not have died a starving and broken-spirited man. Traditionally, she is said to have done her best for several meritorious writers of whom Nathaniel Lee, the playwright, was one. Again, if the florid account of her which appeared in the eighteenth century is to be trusted, she strove "with the utmost warmth" to make Charles relieve the distress of "Hudibras" Butler: and, seeing how intensely Charles had relished his witty and biting couplets, it is astonishing that Nell should have pleaded in vain. According to the eighteenth-century scribbler she was too sorry for Butler to sit back and twiddle her thumbs. She therefore arranged for Wycherley ("a Mr. Wycherley,"

says the scribbler quaintly) to introduce Butler to the Duke of Buckingham; and we can assuredly assume that Buckingham, in spite of his debts, bestirred himself to assist a man who had been sent to him by so well-trying a friend as Nell.

The devotion that she inspired in people of the upper class and the extent to which the public instinctively loved her are both shown in a startling experience which befell her on February the 16th. As a rule she was greeted with smiles and cheers wherever she went. Even Rochester, in his back-handed "Panegyrick on Mrs. Nelly," had to admit that

She's now the darling Strumpet of the Crowd,
Forgets her State, and talks to them aloud;
Lays by her Greatness, and descends to prate
With those 'bove whom she's rais'd by wondrous Fate.

On this day, however, she paid a visit to the Duke's Theatre and was seated in her box, enjoying the play, when a drunken man, staggering into the pit, caught sight of her and began to shout that she was a whore. In all probability she good-humouredly retorted in kind, but nothing that she said to him could have been audible, for the majority of the audience was heartily fond of her and within a few moments the playhouse had become a pandemonium. Indeed, a young man of very distinguished lineage—Mr. Herbert, who was afterwards eighth Earl of Pembroke—flashed out his rapier, and for a minute or two there was every likelihood of a panic and a general brawl. The performance had stopped. The hubbub increased, and even when the drunkard, severely man-handled, had been hustled out of the theatre, most persons in the audience must have watched Mrs. Nelly's behaviour with more curiosity than they watched the play.

She was, we are told, "too giddy to mistrust a false friend," and she seems to have had little or no intuition in choosing her financial advisers. Brought up in a section of society where a few coppers could make the difference between getting a meal and going to bed with no supper inside her, she had never been able to control the vast sums which flowed over her when Charles turned the tap of his Treasury. Her arithmetic, too, was probably as primitive as her handwriting; and the household accounts were now in such extreme confusion that she decided to give up the unequal struggle and to hand over her financial affairs to a solicitor, one Thomas Fraizer. It was unfortunate that she could not have learned from the judicial Dasent that her steward "was said to be a notorious usurer."

She sent for Mr. Fraizer, explained to him that all this money bewildered her and that she was weary of signing receipts, and asked him if he could help her. As a result of their interview, Mr. Fraizer drew up a document in which she gave him powers of attorney. The document closes with a passage of unconscious legal irony which, in view of Nell's reason for invoking him, diverts the mere layman. She grants to Mr. Fraizer the right "generally to act and agitate all things in and about the receipt of the premises as fully and effectually to all intents and purposes as I myself might or could do the same were I in person present."

No sooner was her mind at rest about money than she had to face the saddest experience, with one exception, that destiny would ever deal to her. Little James Beauclerk had been living in Paris for two years. In September 1680 he died there, being then only eight years old. He must have fallen ill very suddenly, for there is no record or rumour that Nell ever, even at this time, went out of England.



NELL GWYN
British Museum

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XXXIV

THE VISIT TO OXFORD (1681)

IN accordance with custom, Nell, after the death of her second son, would have lived for some time in seclusion, and this fact may explain why there is little to record of her in the year 1681. At last, after a lapse of ten years, *The Indian Emperor* was revived, and in the course of the year Nell probably went, with a lively interest, to see a play in which she had made her first appearance and a new player in the part of "Cydaria."

At some time in their association Charles gave her a country estate called Bestwood Park, in Nottinghamshire. Legend affirms that he told her to take as much of the land as she could ride round before breakfast, but if she galloped round Bestwood Park once it is likely enough that she rarely went there again. Nottinghamshire was too far from London to attract so perfect a Londoner. Charles, however, now gave her a property which meant much more to her than a source of income. Burford House, a stone's-throw from Windsor Castle, was a fine mansion, redecorated for Nell by the Court painter Verrio, and it had a large and beguiling garden which included a bowling-alley; and for the rest of her life Nell divided her time between Burford House and Pall Mall. Unfortunately, the house was demolished in 1839 in order that the present stables might be built on the site. The garden had been broken up many years earlier for the purpose of completing the celebrated Long Walk.*

* These facts derive from the pages of the indispensable Dasent.

Blank as the year seems, it does at least contain one famous, characteristic and delightful episode. Hortense, despite her grand beauty, seems now to have been relegated, as it were, to the Second Eleven, but the ten-years war between Nell and Louise continued with unabated fury. Louise at this time was even more vehemently detested by the general public than she had been in the past: for all England was agitated by the probability that some day the Duke of York would come to the throne. At first sight it always seems odd that ordinary people should have felt as hotly as they did about political questions, for only the nobility and a few thousand of the landed gentry had any voice in the election of members to Parliament; but the explanation is, of course, that the seventeenth century was pre-eminently an epoch of sectarian passion, and that religious and political issues were very tightly interlocked. Charles was determined that James should succeed him. James was an irreclaimable Catholic. And the English people had no intention whatever of risking the re-establishment of "popery" in our midst. Louise, therefore, was detested not only because she was a foreigner, but also, and more fiercely, because she was a Catholic and might even be proselytising the King.

Charles, wanting money, had decided to convene Parliament in March. He convened it at Oxford rather than at Westminster because he hoped to profit by the intensely Royalist tradition of Oxford. Nell, too, had gone there in her coach—musing, we can be sure, upon her father who at Oxford had died, some twenty-five years ago, in a debtor's prison. When she arrived the crowd, who had not the London crowd's familiarity with her appearance, assumed that so fine a coach, with a lady's head sometimes visible through the small windows, could

be the coach of no one except the abominated Duchess of Portsmouth. They overflowed from the pavement into the narrow street, besieged the coach, and prevented it from going forward. Nell was astonished and perhaps a little intimidated by this unusual reception. Then the crowd began to shout abuse of the French and the Catholics: whereupon, seeing the situation in a flash, Nell, with the utmost composure, put her curly head out of the window and cried to them: "Be civil, good people, be civil! I am not he. I am the Protestant whore." These words were enough, and she finished her journey amidst acclamations.

However, she stayed in Oxford only for eight days. Charles, finding his new Parliament less humble than he had hoped, immediately dissolved it, and he and Nell drove back to Windsor.

XXXV

CHELSEA HOSPITAL (1682)

WE hear no word of her illness at present, but nothing is more improbable than that her health at this time or thenceforth was truly sound. Apart from that, her fortunes changed for the better. She spent much of her time amidst the verdurous undramatic beauty of the countryside at Windsor, but nothing could hold her for long from teasing Louise: and now, if the two jests have not been confused, she repeated one of her most mischievous pranks. In France a great personage had died—a personage who had actually been a Prince of the Blood; and Louise, who had an almost fantastic reverence for the Blood, instantly claimed that she had lost a near relative and must therefore put herself into full mourning. Luck was with Nell. As though to oblige her, that august person the Cham of Tartary proceeded to give up the ghost, and Nell, rallying bravely from the first shock of this news, appeared in full mourning at Court. Someone, says a letter writer of the period—someone who had possibly rehearsed the part in Pall Mall—went up to Nell and anxiously enquired the extent of her bereavement. “Alack,” sighed Nell, “I am mourning for the Cham of Tartary.” “But, Mrs. Nelly,” protested her friend, “what is the Cham of Tartary to you?” “Exactly the same relation,” said Nell, “that the French Prince was to her Grace of Portsmouth.”

Perhaps Nell would not have baited Louise with such pertinacity if she had known that, as seems to

be unquestionable, Louise and she were suffering from the same malady. It is, moreover, to this period that some, at least, of the stories about her kindness apply. There is, for example, the highwayman who stopped her coach as she was driving over Bagshot Heath, on her way to see the new palace that Charles was building at Winchester: the highwayman to whom she gave ten guineas, with a laugh, because he had amused her by saying, "I hope, madam, you will give me something for myself after I have took all you have away?" It was now, too, that one day she was riding in her chair—going perhaps to one of her interminable card-parties—when she noticed that police officers were hustling a clergyman along the street. Something in his expression appealed to her heart. She stopped the officers, and learning that the clergyman was a debtor and on his way to prison, she at once paid his debt, remembering her father's grim end, and sent off the astounded stranger with a God-speed. Now, again, she went one afternoon to look at the mad folk in Bedlam. To watch their antics and grimaces had been for many years an entertainment as popular as, in our time, a visit to the unprotesting animals in the Zoo. In Nell, however, fun was never far from pity. The sight of a certain inmate touched her deeply. He had once been Oliver Cromwell's porter and was now suffering from religious mania and a terror of hell-fire. Nell, unable to help him in any other way, sent or subsequently brought him a Bible. Furthermore, in this year a calamitous fire broke out at Wapping, and the extent of the damage and of the ensuing distress can be judged from the fact that Charles headed a subscription on behalf of the citizens of Wapping with a gift of a thousand pounds. "A person of quality," whose identity remains undiscovered, contributed five hundred; and

another hundred, extracted from Charles, was added by Nell herself.

It is clear that she and Charles were now upon the most affectionate terms and that she was very frequently with him. Both of them had, in fact, more time than usual at their disposal: Charles, because Louise, hoping to get rid of her malady, had gone to drink the waters at Bourbon; Nell, because she had lately sent her son, "my lord of Burford," to learn French and deportment at Paris. There he was placed under the supervision of Lord Preston, an Envoy-Extraordinary. Perhaps it was her new leisure which caused her, at about this time, to commission Kneller to paint her portrait. She must at least have been in funds, and it would be uncharitable to withhold from Mr. Fraizer some credit for this improvement. We know that it was in this year that she bought her famous pearl-necklace. This necklace of "fifty pearls evenly matched" had once been the possession of Prince Rupert, and may, as one writer has astutely suggested, have been originally strung for his mother, the Queen of Bohemia. The Prince had given it to his mistress, Peg Hughes—the actress whom Mr. Pepys had once kissed, who had been Sedley's mistress, and whose brother had been killed in the quarrel about the comparative beauty of herself and Nell. Prince Rupert now died, and Peg, who was probably as extravagant as most actresses of the time, felt that she could now turn it into cash without incurring his wrath. Nell was a ready purchaser: and so great was the beauty of the necklace that she paid £4,250 for it. Prince Rupert would not have resented her ownership of the heirloom. He liked not only her but her son; for in the Verney MSS. we read that "some say he sent his Garter to the King, desiring that Lord Burford might have it with his daughter

by Peg Hughes, to which last two he had left all his jewels and personal estate and arrears due from His Majesty."

Perhaps, while Louise was away at Bourbon, Charles had a little spare cash, and had contributed to the cost of the necklace. And who knows? He had little enough conscience, but it is possible that he guessed something about Nell that she herself did not know—in fact, that, like Louise a few years earlier, she deserved a vain recompense for an irretrievable injury.

And in this year, if at all, Charles and she were associated in a work which beautifully links them with our own time. In the spring Charles laid the foundation-stone of Chelsea Hospital. How much that hospital was needed we shall instantly realise if we consider that the Civil War had ended in 1648 and that in consequence there must have been—in 1682—many soldiers, both Royalists and Round-heads, who were sixty or seventy and had been "broken" in the war. Tradition has always maintained that it was pretty witty Nell who initiated the notion of a hospital for old soldiers; and remembering how grievously her father had come down in the world because he had fought for Charles the First, how tenacious were Nell's memories and affections, and how quick she was to feel compassion, no deed could be more thoroughly in character. They used also to tell how Charles, with a map of the estate in front of him, had promised Nell that the hospital grounds should correspond with the area on the map which she could cover with her dainty handkerchief: and that Nell, following many a romantic precedent, had straightway quadrupled the hospital grounds by tearing her handkerchief into strips. Indeed, her close connection with Chelsea hospital is the first thing which most of us learn about her:

and no reasonable person will deny that a tradition so strong as this is very seldom without any foundation. It is therefore lamentable that anyone, attempting to show how foolish and romantic the rest of us may be, should have exposed his own intellectual shallowness by suggesting that Nell had nothing to do with the hospital.

According to Evelyn's Diary, Sir Stephen Fox was the person chiefly responsible for urging Charles to undertake an enterprise which, kind-hearted as he was, would have been wholly congenial to his nature. None but a Gradgrind would see any significance whatever in the negative fact that Evelyn says nothing of Nell's part in the scheme. It was a big public official undertaking, and whether she first thought of it or whether she only pressed it continually upon Charles's attention, the world would be most unlikely to hear of work so entirely unofficial as hers. The historian of the hospital may dismiss the old tradition with supercilious regret, but the man who prides himself upon being hard-headed should remember that the blockhead is his brother. An earlier defender of the opposite view has put the matter so well that I shall leave the last word to him. "An attempt characteristic of the senseless sort of modern scepticism," wrote Cecil Chesterton in 1912, "has been made to dispute the story of her connection with the foundation of Chelsea Hospital. The tradition in favour of the view that she induced Charles to found it is as strong as any tradition can be. It was certainly believed in her own time. For over a century the old soldiers used to solemnly toast her as their benefactress. An inn close to the hospital bore her name and an inscription commemorative of her act. Nothing can be adduced on the other side save the silence of official documents. As if any official document would

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be likely to contain the statement that the King had taken the step at the request of his mistress." We must be fanatical unromantics if we are to take away from Nell Gwyn the noblest effect of her mothering instinct toward men.

XXXVI

"I THINK I SHALL DIE" (1683-1684)

WHEN we are in our middle twenties we find that there is an epidemic of marriages among our friends, and death seems almost as negligible as darkness does at noon on a summer's day. In middle and later life death steadily thins the company of those with whom we have shared a look at the world. An acquaintance with death came rather sooner to Nell than it does to most people. At twenty-nine she had buried her mother in the churchyard of St. Martin's-in-the-Fields; at thirty she had lost her second child; at thirty-two she had heard of the death of the actor Lacy, who had once taught her dancing and may have been one of her earliest lovers. Now, when she was thirty-three, two of her first friends died: Tom Killigrew, who had seemed so tremendous a figure when she was an orange-girl in his theatre, and Charles Hart, who for her had been "Charles the First." In the next year Mohun died, an actor with whom she had probably kept always in touch. And the coming of death to Killigrew and Hart may have saddened her the more because at this date she was so ill as to believe that she herself had not much longer to live. Nevertheless, in 1684 she realised one of her liveliest ambitions. Her son Charles, who was now fourteen, became Duke of St. Albans.

Meanwhile, she made life as pleasant as she could, giving "candle-lit supper-parties" at 79 Pall Mall and often following them with small concerts. At these, Bowman, the best male singer of his time, would usually assist, and in all probability Moll Knight and other old theatre friends would also be present. On one occasion when Bowman and some

“I THINK I SHALL DIE”

less famous artists had particularly delighted her visitors, among whom were Charles and his successor to the throne, Nell seized the opportunity of doing her friends a good turn: and it is from Bowman himself that we get this little story. When Charles had praised them cordially, she turned to him and said: “Then, Sir, if you are not talking like a courtier, who speaks much and does little, I hope that you will give the musicians a royal present!” Charles, as usual, had brought no money. James confessed that he had “not above a guinea or two.” And then, if two stories have not again been mixed, Nell slyly reminded Charles of their first encounter by exclaiming dramatically: “Odsfish! What sort of company *am* I gotten into?”

We have seen that she had a way with men. Her letter to Hyde is alone enough to prove that; but unlike a pirate woman, she was evidently just as charming to most women. For this we have the evidence of a delightful and profoundly pathetic letter which she dictated to her secretary in the spring of this year: and seeing that it is really a letter of complaint, we can judge the measure of her natural sweetness by the fact that she could not prevent it from breaking through. In order to understand the letter in detail we shall do well to remember that (1) the lady to whom she sent it was, almost certainly, the mother of Sarah Jennings who afterwards became the wife of the great Duke of Marlborough and the bosom crony of Queen Anne; that (2) “Griffin” was Mrs. Jennings’ son-in-law; that (3) “Lady Williams” had been a mistress to the Duke of York, and that although she must therefore have been a plain-faced woman,* she was now

* Charles said on one occasion: “My brother’s mistresses are so ugly that I can only think his confessor imposes them upon him as a penance. The last one squinted like a dragon.”

the wife of a Dorsetshire baronet; that (4) "Potevin" was an upholsterer; that (5) the Duchess of Norfolk never bore the child which Nell so confidently supposed her to be "carrying"; that (6) the "Duke of Grafton," to whom Nell wanted to make a gift, was a son of Barbara Villiers; that (7) "Lord Kildare" was the husband of Charles's last mistress; and that (8) when Nell speaks of "boiling" her silver, she means that, owing to new financial difficulties, she had sent much of it to be melted down. The letter reads thus:

These for Madam Jennings, over against the Tub Tavern
in Jermyn Street, London.

Windsor, Burford House,

April 14th, 1684.

Madam,—I have received your letter, and I desire you would speak to my Lady Williams to send me the gold stuff, and a note [a bill] with it, because I must sign it: then she shall have her money, the next day, of Mr. Trant. Pray tell her ladyship that I will send her a note of what quantity of things I'll have bought, if her ladyship will put herself to the trouble to buy them. When they are bought, I will sign a note for her to be paid. Pray, madam, let the man go on with my sedan, and send Potevine and Mr. Coker* down to me, for I want them both. The bill is very dear to boil the plate, but necessity hath no law.

I am afraid, Madam, you have forgot my mantle, which you were to line with musk-colour satin, and all my other things; for you send no patterns nor answer. Monsieur Lainey is going away. Pray send me word about your son Griffin, for His Majesty is mighty well-pleased that he will go along with my Lord Duke. I am afraid you are so much taken up with your own house that you forget my business.

* Perhaps John Coques from whom Nell had bought most of her silver goods.

“I THINK I SHALL DIE”

My service to dear Lord Kildare, and tell him I love him with all my heart. Pray, madam, see that Potevine brings now all my things with him. My Lord Duke's bed, etc., if he hath not made them all up, he may do that here, for if I do not get my things out of his hands now, I shall not have them this time twelvemonth. The Duke [her son Charles] brought me down with him my crochet of diamonds; and I love it better because he brought it. Mr. Lumley and everybody else will tell you that it is the finest thing ever was seen. Good madam, speak to Mr. Beaver to come down too, that I may bespeak a ring for the Duke of Grafton before he goes into France.

I have continued extreme ill ever since you left me, and I am so still. I have sent to London for a doctor. I believe I shall die. My service to the Duchess of Norfolk, and tell her I am as sick as her Grace, but do not know what I ail, although she does, which I am overjoyed that she goes on with her great belly.

Pray tell my Lady Williams that the King's mistresses are accounted ill paymasters, but she shall have her money the next day after I have the stuff.

Here is a sad slaughter at Windsor, the young men taking their leaves and going to France; and although they are none of my lovers, yet I am loath to part with the men.

Mrs. Jennings, I love you with all my heart, and so good-bye. E. G.

Let me have an answer to this letter.

By August she was well enough to accompany Charles upon a visit to Winchester. Perhaps the visit was one of Charles's disconcerting whims, for no one appears to have made any arrangements for his reception or at least for Nell's. When they arrived, Charles presumably lodged with some notable person in the city. Nell drove up to the clerical quarters in the Cathedral Close, baggage and all, and gaily announced herself. Nobody knew what to do with her. Ultimately Thomas Ken, one

of the King's chaplains, being required to manage the situation, had the courage to say that he would not lodge one of the King's mistresses in any house connected with the Cathedral. Nell's annoyance had no more effect upon him than her charm: and there they stood at an impasse—the courtesan and the churchman. Fortunately for Nell, the Dean was a better courtier than the chaplain and not so plucky a moralist. He came to the rescue by giving her a bed in the Deanery; but Nell, realising perhaps that his hospitality would bring a good deal of discomfort upon him, removed herself as early as possible to the country house of Lady Shrewsbury at Avington.

The chaplain, no matter how strongly he relied upon God, must have wondered in what way Charles would punish him for his behaviour. The King, however, responded at all times to courage, physical or moral; as, for example, in his lenient treatment of that wild scamp Colonel Blood who so nearly succeeded in purloining the Crown Jewels. And so it was in the matter of Thomas Ken; for when, a few months later, a see became vacant and somebody, presumably ignorant of the Winchester affair, put forward Ken's name, Charles, instead of becoming furious, chuckled and responded: "Why, yes! who *should* have Bath and Wells if not the little black fellow who refused poor Nelly a lodging?"

By this time Louise was back from Bourbon, and Charles, although there were many signs that his exceptional vitality was beginning to fail, continued to strain it by dividing his favours between Louise, Hortense and Nell. Mr. Bryant has done much to prove that he was in many ways a good man and even occasionally a considerate husband. His portrait of Charles would have been less attractive if he had printed a note which the King indiscreetly scribbled and sent to Louise:

“I THINK I SHALL DIE”

My dear Life [it runs], I will come to-morrow either to dine, or immediately after, and then will settle all, but certainly I shall not mind the Queen when you are in the case. Adieu, I am yours.

As for Nell, he had decided at long last to gratify one of her heart's desires. He planned to ennoble her as Countess of Greenwich.

XXXVII

THE COLLAPSE OF HER WORLD (1685)

EARLY in February 1685 John Evelyn wrote in his Diary: "I can never forget the inexpressible luxury and profaneness, gaming and all dissoluteness and, as it were, total forgetfulness of God (it being a Sunday evening), which this day se'nnight I was witness of; the King sitting and toying with his concubines, Portsmouth, Cleveland, Mazarine, etc., a French boy singing love-songs in that glorious gallery, whilst about twenty of the great courtiers and other dissolute persons were at basset round a large table, a bank of at least £2,000 in gold before them; upon which two gentlemen who were with me made strange reflections. Six days after, all was in the dust."

On the morning of February the 2nd the King was suddenly taken ill. So grave was his condition that by noon the doctors believed that nothing could save him. The news, we can be certain, rapidly reached Nell Gwyn; and in addition to her anxiety she had to endure the anguish of not being allowed to see her lord and lover. He rallied so vigorously that on the morning of the 5th he was said to be out of danger: but in the evening of the same day he relapsed badly. Everyone knows how stoically he withstood the torments inflicted upon him by his platoon of well-meaning doctors. Everyone knows, too, how whimsically he apologised for being "so unconscionable a time a-dying." This, however, was an important and, as it were, official event, and neither Nell nor any of the concubines were per-

mitted to go near him. The others may have feared chiefly for their futures. Nell, separated from him by so short a distance, must have suffered to the limit of emotional agony, for she had loved him long and truly: and if she heard of it, she must have thanked Louise in her heart for divining that Charles would wish to receive the ministrations of a Catholic priest. Louise knew well how his thoughts had moved in the last few years, and it was she, working perhaps through James, who contrived that the King's last hours should be comforted by the presence and the priestcraft of old Father Huddleston who, long ago, had saved his life when the new-born Commonwealth had hunted for him in vain. At last, a few days after Nell's thirty-fifth birthday—

God's image, God's anointed, lay
Without motion, pulse or breath,
A senseless lump of sacred clay,
An image now of death.

According to most historians, Charles died of apoplexy. There seems, however, to be some ground for thinking that he may have been poisoned.

Perhaps Nell first realised the truth when she heard the bells tolling. In Charles she had lost the most difficult and the dearest of her children. Soon after his death a rumour spread round the Court that Mrs. Nelly had secretly become a Catholic; and this may well have been true. She had just the impulsive nature to feel, for a little while, that she must share in the religion which had helped Charles to die with a spirit at peace. At such a time no theological niceties would have teased her. She would want to do anything, however forlornly, that might give her a sense of being nearer to the man whom she had loved steadfastly for seventeen years. And the mood would pass, and the noble ritual

PRETTY WITTY NELL

which in her first wild grief had brought some assuagement, would lose its influence upon her as, morning by morning, she became increasingly familiar with the huge chasm in her life.

XXXVIII

DISMAL JIMMY'S KINDNESS (1685)

ENGLAND, in twenty-five years, had accumulated considerable affection for Charles, and the people mourned him sincerely. Nell, as we know, had spared "no cost, no velvet" in celebrating the obsequies of her mother; and now, following the same primitive instinct, she wanted to dramatise her sorrow and manifest her respect for Charles by using as much pomp as might be in her public mourning. She ordered her servants, or perhaps commissioned Mr. Potevin, the upholsterer, to drape her coach and sedan in the darkest magnificence. She went further, and overstepped her rights by proposing to mourn for her royal lover in a manner which was not permissible to any but a royal mourner. "Nell Gwyn," says a letter-writer a fortnight after the death of Charles, "has been forbid to put her house in mourning, or to use the sort of nails about her coach and chair which it seems is kept as a distinction for the Royal Family on such occasions, and had else been put on by her command." We do not know who it was that had interfered with her plan. Perhaps it was the new Queen, a stern Catholic and a strict moralist. James, if he could have waived this pettifogging restriction, would probably have done so; for he very soon showed that he meant to do his best by Nell. Someone at least had shown clearly how much her position in the world was now altered.

During May and June even a woman so sick as Nell must have been stirred by Monmouth's fantastic insurrection against the new King. He went

so far as to assert publicly that James had poisoned King Charles; and it cannot have surprised anyone, though it may have grieved Nell Gwyn, when Monmouth was executed on July the 15th. James did not even believe him to be Charles's son. He believed, as many people still do, that Monmouth was the son of Robert Sidney.

As the year passed, she had ample reason for fearing that her fairy-story career was in danger of collapsing completely. At some date after Charles's death she engaged his cook, whose appropriate name was Lamb, but she would not have indulged in this last extravagance if she could have foreseen her financial future. As usual, she was heavily in debt; and her creditors, knowing that she would now have to live within her income, decided to advance their claims upon her at once. And, of course, the same reflection had occurred to all of them simultaneously. Bills flooded the house in Pall Mall. She was quite unable, so suddenly, to pay off everybody; and some of her lesser creditors remorselessly (but intelligibly) invoked the law. She found herself actually outlawed for debt.

The position, indeed, was so desperate that she turned for help to her old friend, "dismal Jimmy"; and seeing that she communicated by letter, it is clear that she was no longer allowed to enter the palace. There is a marked change of tone in these notes if we compare them with the earlier letters. They are even slightly histrionic: but we must bear in mind not only that she was distracted but also that she was now an exceedingly sick woman. In the first note she says, with a possible recollection of the speech that Shakespeare gives to Wolsey when he, like Nell Gwyn, had fallen, "Had I suffered for my God as I have done for your Brother and you, I should not have need either of your kindness or

justice to me. I beseech you not to do anything to the settling of my business till I speak with you, to appoint me by Mr. Grahams where I may speak with you privately. God make you as happy as my soul prays you may be."

James, although he must have been overwhelmed by the new cares of kingship, made time to attend to her troubles. In the second note she says: "This world is not capable of giving me greater joy and happiness than your Majesty's favour, not as you are King and so have it in your power to do me good, having never loved your Brother and yourself upon that account but as to your persons. Had he lived, he told me before he died that the world should see by what he did for me [i.e. by making her Countess of Greenwich] that he had both love and value for me, and that he did not do for me, as my mad Lady Woster. He was my friend and allowed me to tell him all my griefs, and did like a friend advise and told me who was my friend and who was not. Sir, the honour your Majesty has done me by Mr. Grahams has given me great comfort, not by the present you sent me to relieve me out of the last extremity [the debtor's prison], but by the kind expressions he made me from you of your kindness to me, which to me is above all things in this world: having, God knows, never loved your Brother or yourself interestedly. All you do for me shall be yours, it being my resolution never to have any interest but yours, and as long as I live to serve you, and when I die to die praying for you."

The accounts of the Secret Service reveal that in September (1685) Richard Graham, acting on behalf of the King, satisfied Nell's creditors to the extent of over £729. In December she received two bounties of £500 each. Nevertheless, her financial condition was so grievous that she had to sell most

of her plate and much of the jewellery which Charles had given to her. She may have parted with the crochet of diamonds which everyone had admired so much. She may have sent the big silver bed to be "boiled," and perhaps even the little silver figure of Jacob Hall was now turned into cash. We know certainly that at this time she relinquished the great necklace of pearls which had been so dear to her pride, and henceforth it adorned the neck of another woman—the third wife of the Duke of Rutland.

She was poor now, and in very bad health, but her charm had not vanished and her spirit was not broken. A certain Sir John Germain, a self-made man of low birth and crude manners, put it to her that she would do well for herself if she became his mistress. We hear of this incident through an unexpected source. A little while after Nell's death the Duke of Norfolk attempted to secure a separation from the Duchess, charging her with having misconducted herself with "Mr. Germain": and the verbatim report of the trial will be of intense interest to anyone who wishes to see some obscure and forgotten persons of the seventeenth century come suddenly to life.*

A Mrs. Benskin, giving evidence before the Lord Chief Justice, stated that on a day in 1685 "milady Duchess went to London with Germaine, Nell Gwin and some others." On the following morning "milady Duchess ordered me," said Mrs. Benskin, "to make a fire, and Mrs. Knifeton was combing her head, and Nell Gwin came in, and said, 'Good-morrow to your grace: how did you rest last night?' She [the Duchess] said, 'Very well.' Then Colonel Cornwall came in, and said to milady Duchess,

* *State Trials*, Vol. XII, pages 907, 909 and 931, contain the references to Nell Gwyn.

'How doth Mr. Germaine do?' And she said, 'Why do you ask me?' And Colonel Cornwall said, 'He did not lie at home last night!' Then Nell Gwin said, 'We shall see him come out by-and-bye like a drowned mouse.' "

Before this, Hudson, the Duke's butler, had said in evidence that "Mrs. Gwin said to the Duchess, 'The dog [Germaine] would have lain with me, but I would not lay the dog where the deer [Charles] laid.' Mrs. Gwin spoke this in the Green Room, and he [Hudson] was in a closet hard by, and the door open, and so heard it." A little later Hudson stated that "milady ordered a fire to be made in my lord's room, where, when she was come, Mrs. Nelly Gwin came in, and asked her how she liked her night's rest. And being asked for Germaine, she said she knew nothing of him. My lady complaining of her hair being out of order, Nelly answered, 'It was a hot night with her, enough to put her hair out of powder and curl too!' Quickly after, Colonel Cornwall came in, and asked for Germaine; and milady saying she knew nothing about him, Nelly Gwin said, 'I question not but he will come out by-and-bye like a drowned rat.' "

The servants had actually put chairs and other obstacles on the dark staircase down which they expected Germaine to leave the Duchess's room, but even by this device they never succeeded in catching him. Indeed, the Duke lost his suit: and anyone who has received injustice from a court of law will sympathise with the Duke when he learns that so late as 1700 his Grace obtained a divorce from the Duchess, and that she then married Sir John Germaine.

XXXIX

SICKNESS AND DEATH (1686-1687)

AS a social figure she had become so unimportant that during the whole of 1686 there is no news of her. If we had any, it would probably show that all her interest was now turned to the welfare of her sixteen-year-old son, a boy who was universally liked and for whom, from first to last, everything went well. Prince Rupert had bequeathed to him jewellery and revenues. Within a year or two the widow of Charles the Second significantly gave him a present of £2,000. If we remember that his father had more charm than any man of the age, and his mother more charm than any of its women, we can readily believe that the first Duke of St. Albans must have been irresistibly attractive. For the rest, throughout 1686 Nell would be struggling ineffectually against a rapidly conquering disease. Moreover, it must have been at about this time that she commissioned Kneller to paint her portrait. In the accounts of her executors we find an item (January 4th, 1688) of £90 "paid to Mr. Kneller."

Early in the following year the disease became violent and the symptoms, in the light of modern medical knowledge, unmistakable. On March the 20th, 1687, she was "dangerously ill and her recovery is in much doubt." Two days later a lady sends news that "Mrs. Nelly is dying of an apoplexy." On the 24th another writer reports that "Mrs. Eleanor Gwyn lies a-dying." However, her doctor, who had been one of Charles's many doctors, effected some improvement, and on the 29th a letter-writer states that "Mrs. Nelly has been dying of an

apoplexy," to which he adds the sinister words, "She has now come to her sense on one side, for the other is dead of a palsy." So skilfully had her doctor worked that for some months, although she knew that her end was not far distant, she seemed to be out of immediate danger.

A hundred memories and emotions must have arisen within her when she heard, in April, that the Duke of Buckingham had died. She may well have remembered then the lovely and grave stanza which Bowman had so often sung:

The glories of our blood and state
Are shadows, not substantial things.
There is no armour against fate;
Death lays his icy hand on kings.
Sceptre and crown must tumble down,
And in the dust be equal made
With the poor crookéd scythe and spade . . .

and throughout the summer death was never out of her thoughts for long. On July the 9th, realising that she was doomed, she made her will,* bequeathing everything to her "dear natural son and to the heirs of his body." As her executors she chose Laurence Hyde, to whom she had once written so gaily, the Earl of Pembroke, Sir Robert Sawyer (who was Attorney-General) and the Honourable Henry Sidney. Among the five persons who witnessed her signature—even here she wrote only "E. G."—was Lucy Hamilton Sandys, presumably the lady for whom she had hired a sedan from Mr. Calow.

In October the King again did his best to ease her mind, actually paying off a mortgage of £1,250 upon her estate in Nottinghamshire: and on the 18th of that month she added to her will a codicil of considerable psychological interest. In this she

* See Appendices, p. 248.

expressly desired that Dr. Tenison should preach her funeral sermon, evidently knowing that with him her reputation would be in safe and kindly hands: and she was right. Her direction that "a decent pulpit-cloth and cushion" should be presented to the church of St. Martin's-in-the-Fields, where her mother had been buried, suggests that she was remembering a talk with Tenison. Next, she desired that a hundred pounds should be handed to him, "to be disposed of at his discretion, for taking any poor debtors of the said parish out of prison, and for clothes this winter." Dr. Tenison and Mr. Warner (her chaplain and one of the witnesses to her will) were also to receive a further fifty pounds which they should use for the benefit of "any two persons of the Roman religion." Among her other bequests are a gift of two hundred pounds to her sister Rose; ten pounds "and mourning, besides their wages due," to her "present nurses"; a year's wages to her servants; fifty pounds to Lady Fairborne and a like sum to Mr. Warner for the purchase of mourning-rings; a hundred pounds to her "kinsman, Mr. Cholmley"; and twenty pounds a year "for the releasing of poor debtors out of prison every Christmas Day." Finally, remembering a poor pensioner whom she seems to have helped for several years, she directed that Lady Holyman's "pension of ten shillings a week" should be "continued to her during the said lady's life."

Some weeks later Mr. Warner wrote out and read to her a second codicil. She was then, apparently, too ill even to scrawl her initials at the end of it. In all probability her hand was paralysed. Mr. Warner had, therefore, to satisfy the legal authorities that the document was valid. In this she made bequests to some of her doctors; gave another two hundred pounds to Rose, perhaps after Rose had visited her

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for the last time; "a new gown" to a certain Mrs. Edling; and twenty pounds a year to "Bridget Long, who has been her servant for divers years."

She had now only a little time to wait. On November the 14th, 1687, she died at 79 Pall Mall. The statement, common to all her biographers, that she died of an apoplectic seizure, is, it would seem, only a half of the truth.

XL

THE FUNERAL SERMON (1687)

ETHEREDGE, even when writing of her death, remains a viperous vulgarian. After referring to Charles, his shabby Muse relieved herself to the following effect:

Nor would his Nelly long be his survivor.
Alas! who now was good enough to drive her?
So she gave way to her consuming grief,
Which brought her past all galley-pot relief.
Howe'er it were, as the old women say,
"Her time was come, and then there's no delay":
So down the Stygian Lake she dropt.

At night, on November the 17th, they buried her, next to old Mrs. Gwyn, in the Vicar's Vault at St. Martin's-in-the-Fields. Her son was present—and so was a very great concourse of people who, like posterity, had loved her without having known her. With considerable courage, for which long afterwards he was in danger of paying dearly, Dr. Tenison preached the funeral sermon. Unfortunately, no record of it remains; but whatever he said, he could hardly have bettered the affectionate, though careful, assessment of her personality which Colley Cibber made when he wrote: "If the common fame of her may be believed, which in my memory was not doubted, she had less to be laid to her charge than any other of those ladies who were in the same state of preferment. She never meddled in affairs of serious moment, or was the tool of working politicians, never broke into those amorous infidelities which others are accused of; but was as visibly dis-

tinguished by her particular personal inclination for the King as her rivals by their titles and grandeur." Nell would certainly have been much distressed if she could have known that when Dr. Tenison was proposed, in the reign of William and Mary, for the bishopric of Lincoln, an enemy tried to prevent him from obtaining it because he had committed the spiritual crime of preaching a memorial sermon about her. Queen Mary (who, as the daughter of James the Second, should have known much concerning Nell) for once comes charmingly to life when she crushed the objection by saying, "I have heard as much, and this is a sign that she died penitent. If I can read a man's heart through his looks, had she not made a truly pious end, the Doctor could never have been induced to speak well of her." Tenison subsequently became Archbishop of Canterbury: but when his own death drew near he directed that nobody should risk the preaching of a memorial sermon for *him*.

Nell Gwyn would not have been surprised to hear that after two or three centuries people would read with interest about Charles, James, Monmouth, Buckingham, Dryden, Sedley, Buckhurst, Rochester and Laurence Hyde: may have supposed, too, that she was an insignificant little person whose name would not endure even so long as the names of Dr. Tenison, Louise de Quérouailles, the Duke of St. Albans, Tom Killigrew, Charles Hart, Sir Robert Howard and Will Chaffinch: and would certainly have been astonished if anyone could have told her that of all the men and women whose lives overlapped the thirty-seven years of her own life Charles, Mr. Samuel Pepys and she would ultimately be the best known, and that of these three it would be herself whom posterity would remember with most love. She would have been surprised to know even

that London remembered her at all, but it was not only the old soldiers at Chelsea who commemorated her passage through the world. "Long after the last of those who had ever seen her face were dead, it remained the custom when alms were distributed at the Savoy Chapel to place near the door a plate with an orange. Learned men speculated as to the origin of this strange custom. They did not know that it was done in honour of the orange-girl who in the days of her greatness had not forgotten the poor in their need."*

* Cecil Chesterton.

XLI

AUTOPSY

WE know very well that many, perhaps all, diseases affect the emotions, ideas and behaviour of the sufferer; as, for example, that consumptives often become amorous, optimistic, spasmodically energetic, and that those who are stricken by cancer will sometimes misinterpret the kindest actions. In consequence, when I read in book after book that Nell Gwyn died of apoplexy, I thought that some knowledge of the effect which an apoplectic condition would have upon the patient's mind should help us to understand how she looked at the world in her later years. Accordingly, I wrote to a friend who is an experienced surgeon, asking him only two questions: the first, whether a person dying of apoplexy, at the age of thirty-seven, would necessarily be fat; the second, what effect the disease would be likely to have upon her mind? Not wishing to appropriate much of his time, I did not send any of the pathological evidence, little though it is, which this book presents.

Perhaps I am simpler than Nell's previous biographers. Be that as it may, his reply astonished me: and I decided to print here the letter which he sent to me because I wanted the reader to feel confident that I had not tampered with a diagnosis made by someone who did not even know any details of the matter. For the sake of clarity I have italicised the phrases in his letter which a reader of this book, bearing in mind the evidence in its earlier pages, ought seriously to consider. He wrote as follows:

Now as to Nell Gwyn. Apoplexy is the rupture of a brain-artery, due to a generalised or localised hardening of the arteries which is associated with high blood-pressure. If her death from apoplexy is authentic, *the hardening and the rupture of the vessel when she was only thirty-seven was almost certainly due to syphilis*. I can go further and say that it must have been due to syphilis, *not the congenital but the acquired variety*.

As to the psychological effects of apoplexy—yes, there is often a lack of control over the emotional states: much laughing, much crying—in short, hysteria. Then again, as this case is most certainly syphilitic, psychogenic symptoms would be induced by the poisons of that disease.

Her excitability I should consider to be primarily due to temperament. Apoplexy is always accompanied by high blood-pressure, *possibly increasing gradually during the ten years before death*. An excitable temperament itself tends to increase blood-pressure: and the blood-pressure of a lethargic person is usually low.

Apoplexy, or cerebral hæmorrhage, may kill instantly or the patient may live many months, or even years, *with paralysis of one side of the face and the opposite side of the body.* Even this paralysis may pass off*. The result depends on the size of the ruptured artery and on the site and importance of the brain-area involved. In a case of high blood-pressure preliminary to apoplexy, the patient is likely to suffer from headaches, nausea, vomiting—that is, from migraine—visual disturbances such as spots and lights in the eyes, and also from ringing in the ears. Often, too, there are fits of depression and irritability. The condition is not like that induced by heart-trouble. In the apoplexy associated with senility of the arteries, the kind which we meet with in aged people, the patient is usually stout. In the syphilitic type, he is not necessarily so.

I hope this is clear, and that it fits in with the historical data.

Yours ever,
Jack Piercy.

* See page 225

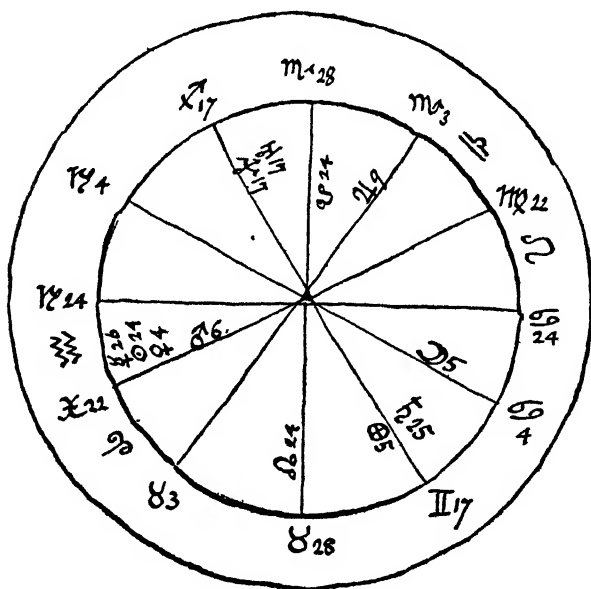
The reader will probably think, as I did, that this diagnosis might less surprisingly have been made by a medical man who had the historical data actually before him. What are they? Firstly, Charles himself is stated to have died of apoplexy. Secondly, Louise de Quérouailles had been ill for some years, and had sought relief at Bath, Tunbridge Wells and Bourbon. However, she lived for another forty-seven years after the death of Nell Gwyn, dying, strangely enough, on the same day of the year. Thirdly, Charles gave Louise a magnificent present to recompense her for an "injury" which she said that he had done to her. Fourthly, Nell said that she had "been sick for three months" when she wrote to Hyde in 1678, nine years before she died. Fifthly, in the letter written six years later she says that she had been, and still was, "extreme ill," and that she believed that she was about to die. Lastly, a letter-writer reported in March 1687 that "she has now come to her sense on one side, for the other is dead of a palsy." With the evidence before him—and a modern diagnosis which was made "in the dark"—the reader will decide for himself whether or not Nell Gwyn had contracted syphilis, and from whom she must, if at all, have contracted it.

In a subsequent conversation that followed the receipt of his letter, my friend, armed with a formidable medical text-book, explained that congenital syphilis shows everywhere except in the arteries, but that it is chiefly in the arteries that acquired syphilis manifests itself: that when a patient who ultimately dies of apoplexy has several strokes (and that would seem to apply to Nell) the earlier strokes are caused by thrombosis or a clotting of blood in the brain arteries, and that these are followed ultimately by the true apoplectic seizure or hæmorrhage of the brain: that apoplexy may be due to atheroma, or

PRETTY WITTY NELL

hardening of the arteries, in a person who is in the second half of adult life—in a person, say, who is over fifty—but that blood-pressure in anyone who is not yet forty cannot be high enough to burst an artery (and so produce apoplexy) unless syphilis, or some less likely agent, has already weakened the arteries so much that one or more of them may burst through the action of even an unexceptional blood-pressure.

NELL GWYN'S HOROSCOPE



XLII

THE MIRROR OF HER SOUL

IF the old science of astrology were not now so discredited, by all persons except the few that have taken the trouble to test it, and if its terminology were not so unintelligible to the public, I should have used Nell Gwyn's horoscope as a kind of rubric to this book, indicating how perfectly her character and the events of her life illustrate the forces represented in her nativity: for after studying the subject during a quarter of a century, my belief that a horoscope is an accurate map or mirror of a personality is, of necessity, unaffected by the scorn or the scepticism of those who do not know even the alphabet of the science. Nothing could seem, in the twentieth century, more unlikely, more fantastic, more obviously pre-scientific than the notion that the "stars" (to put the matter crudely) have any relationship with the "soul" of a human being; nor has anyone at present been able to suggest a convincing philosophical theory that should explain the connection of the two: but in this matter, as in all others, the proof of the pudding is in the eating, and no one, I believe, who tastes the pudding with care will be able to deny that it is good.

Like every other student of astrology, I am more than familiar with the easy and ignorant flippancy with which the orthodox inhabitants of our century treat it, many of them making laborious mirth out of even the technical terms which an astrologer must employ, although it is just as fatuous to adopt such an attitude as it would be to deride a chemist's formula. The use of technical terms cannot be avoided,

and it is partly on account of this consideration that I put an interpretation of Nell's horoscope at the end of this book—where it may the more comfortably be ignored. Perhaps I should add that I submitted this elementary reading of the map to the best astrologer now alive and that, having audited it, he has found it, on the whole, correct. The numbers in brackets, here and there in the text, refer to his comments which I have placed at the end of this chapter.

Nell Gwyn, "tho' below middle size, was well-turned." By our standard she would seem decidedly small. Her hair, luxuriant and curly, was bronzed in colour, streaked with gold. Her eyebrows and eyelashes were dark; her eyes dark blue; and her nose a little tip-tilted. She had a fine skin and a wild-rose complexion. Her body was well shaped, and she was famed for the smallness of her feet. From her portraits we see that she was plump and full-breasted; that she had dimples; that her eyes were bright; and that she had a full under-lip.

The student may be startled at first to notice that her Rising Sign was Capricorn, a sign which does not accompany good looks or physical rondure. He should observe, however, that the larger part of the First House ("the front door" through which a personality shows itself to the world) is under the influence of Aquarius. Moreover, in this House there are four planets (convenience compels us to speak of the Sun and Moon as planets): the Sun, Venus and Mercury being in Aquarius, and Mars in Pisces. Every astrologer knows that such a combination would almost obliterate the physical influence of an unoccupied Rising Sign. It would make her, in appearance and in personality, of the Aquarian type: but this again would be modified by the strong position of her Moon in Cancer. The Moon in this

position would add fullness to the face, the figure and particularly the breasts. Mars in Pisces would also tend to make her plump. Again, Mars (in semi-square to the cusp of the First House) is responsible for the reddish tint of her hair. Furthermore, the fact that Mars is in Pisces (the feet), in beautiful aspect to the Moon, accounts for the fire and grace with which she danced the jigs that delighted everyone at the King's Theatre. We can say, then, that she derived her good looks from the prominent position of the Sun and Venus. If these planets had been actually in conjunction, she would have been a beauty of the first order.

And what personal attribute should we expect to find most marked in a horoscope of Nell? Everyone, I think, will agree that we should look for extreme charm. That, however, is precisely the attribute which accompanies the rising of Aquarius. I turn to the best elementary book on astrology,* and find in it a list of seven well-known Aquarians. Would it be easy to assemble another seven persons whose charm is so ungainsayable? The names on that list are Queen Mary, the Prince of Wales, Lloyd George, Lord Baden-Powell, R. L. Stevenson, Ruskin and —Jackie Coogan. To these we can add the name of Rupert Brooke. Aquarius, again, is noted for being a humane, sociable, democratic and idealistic sign: and all these qualities, with the possible exception of idealism, are eminent in Nell Gwyn's personality. Even idealism may be implicit in her retort to Beck Marshall (see p. 112).

Observe, too, how the Sun and Mercury are in trine (the most favourable) aspect to Saturn. This position must have given her considerable common-sense and a substratum of sobriety, chastity and

* *A Beginner's Guide to Practical Astrology*, by Vivian E. Robson.

poise. She may have been "too giddy to mistrust a false friend" (1), but she cannot have been hysterical, like Lady Castlemaine and Louise de Quérouailles. Indeed, any man of experience will understand how greatly Charles would have appreciated a mistress who did not make scenes. Observe, again, that Venus is in trine to the Part of Fortune (worldly goods) and that Mars is in square (evil) aspect to it. The trine from Venus indicates that her face (and her charm) would "be her fortune"; the square from Mars, that she would use her good luck imprudently. Moreover, the Part of Fortune being in the Fourth House (property) signifies that she would benefit from houses and "immovable possessions." We know that she owned 79 Pall Mall, Burford House, Bestwood Park and apparently other properties.

Her Second House (money) is ruled by Jupiter. It also contains much Martial influence. Now, the salient characteristic in this horoscope is the magnificent three-fold trine of Jupiter, Mars and the Moon. Even a tyro, seeing the splendour of this group, would predict a life of great brilliance. With two planets from this group controlling her finances (because they hold sway over her Second House) we should know at once (even had we seen the horoscope while she was running about barefoot in the purlieus of Drury Lane) that she would have gold and property in full measure.

Saturn in the Fifth House (children, love-affairs and games of chance) shows, in the first place, disappointment and sorrow. We must remember that one of her children died when he was eight. We must remember, too, that her early sex-affairs were not lasting, and that the affairs with Buckhurst and Hart concluded unhappily. We must remember, again, that she seems not to have been lucky at the card-table. Saturn, however, is in trine to the

Sun and to Mercury. The Sun, in a woman's horoscope, represents the husband: or, since the planets disregard human institutions, the man who is most influential in her life. Here it stands, obviously, for Charles: and Mercury, perhaps, for her "dear son," the Duke of St. Albans. If the student will refer to the horoscope of Charles the Second he will find a relationship between the two horoscopes which would stagger a sceptic—if he took the trouble to understand it. For the Sun in Charles's horoscope is so placed (in the seventeenth degree of Gemini) that it coincides with the cusp (or strongest point) of the Fifth House (love affairs) in the horoscope of Nell Gwyn. Moreover, his Sun is in exact opposition to her Neptune and Uranus which, again, are on the cusp of her Eleventh House (friendships). If ever an intimate association was predestined, it was the eighteen years' intimacy of the King and the comedy actress.

The fact that Saturn is in weak opposition to Neptune and Uranus indicates that there was more sorrow in her life with Charles than historians imagine. The sesquiquadrate aspect from the Dragon's Tail to Saturn in the Fifth House would minimise her chances of winning much money at the basset-parties of her friends.

The Moon is in the Sixth House, and having the trine aspects from Jupiter and Mars, gave her abundant vitality, and accounts for her immense popularity with the crowd (signified by the Moon). It would also make her beloved by Bridget Long and her other servants (the Sixth House). The Seventh House (marriage) is under the influence of the Moon, the Sun and Mercury: and since all three planets are well placed, we should expect her to "marry" successfully. Her Eighth House (death and legacies) is ruled by Mercury and Venus. Venus is

so brilliant in this horoscope that her influence would be beneficial wherever it finds an outlet. Here it may signify the munificence of James the Second after his brother's death. I think, too, that it promised an easy death which was somewhat protracted by the square of Saturn (delay) to the cusp of the Eighth House (death).

The Ninth House (religion) is ruled by Mars. It is occupied by Jupiter in a Martial sign (Scorpio). From this we should guess that she would be orthodox (Jupiter), as she was, and form her religious views upon impulse (Mars). The position indicates a conventional acceptance of religion. Mars also governed her Tenth House (worldly standing, honour, superiors), and, thanks to the threefold trine which dominates the whole of this horoscope, we should anticipate general success. The student, however, must not overlook the square from the Sun and Mercury to the cusp of the Tenth House and to the Dragon's Tail. This was the affliction, no doubt, which prevented her from achieving a social position equal to that of the Duchesses who were her rivals.

On the very cusp of the Eleventh House (friends) we find the astonishing conjunction of Uranus (the sudden and uncommon) and Neptune (the fantastic, the incredible, the phenomenal). If Lilly could have known that they were so placed, he would have rubbed his hands with the delight of a surgeon who finds the very symptoms which he had expected. The position (especially in relation to the Sun in Charles's horoscope) explains how an orange-girl, who had been "brought up in a brothel," became the life-long mistress of a King and a friend of half the nobility in England.

Turning now to the triplicities, we find that only one planet is in a Cardinal Sign (2). True, that

planet is the Moon, and the Moon at her most powerful. Nevertheless, on the whole, Nell Gwyn must have lacked enterprise and initiative. Before I had examined the horoscope I suspected that she did not choose her occupations but found herself engaged in them. I suspected, for instance, that she had no intention of becoming an actress and took no steps toward becoming anything more than an orange-girl. Other people decided that she had a talent for comedy; and, being pushed into a new career, she accepted it. Similarly, she probably had no scheme, as Louise and Hortense had, for captivating Charles. She merely accepted his invitation to the supper-party at the tavern, hoping for an amusing evening, and the planets took charge of the situation. Her Aquarian charm bewitched him. The trines in her horoscope carried her to triumph. The coincidence of Charles's Sun and the cusp of her love-house must have made that first meeting electrical.

If she had not had four planets in Fixed Signs she would have been much more "giddy" than she was: a veritable flibberty-gibbet. They gave her personality definition. They prevented her from taking too much tone from her surroundings. They caused her to remain herself, no matter whether she was consorting with lechers in a brothel or with great ladies in Whitehall. The four planets in Mutable Signs, inasmuch as three of them are the heavyweights in the horoscope (Neptune, Uranus and Saturn), gave her a lack of depth and a certain rootlessness. The other (Mars) is weakly placed (in Pisces). Despite her continuous baiting of Louise, she cannot have been really combative.

The sign-position of Mars also suggests that there was very little masculinity in her sex-nature. Jupiter in Scorpio (a sexual sign) and in trine to Venus and

the Moon would make her ardent, loving and richly sexed, but the position of the Moon in Cancer (the sign of the mother and the home) supports another of my earliest impressions: namely, that Nell Gwyn, though destiny made her a courtesan, was by nature maternal (3). I guess that she had a maternal attitude toward Charles, and that this explains her apparent indifference to his innumerable infidelities, her constancy, and his evident feeling that she was different from the others.

When, finally, we examine the disposition of the four elements, we find that there was no "earth" in her nature; except that an earth-sign (Capricorn) is rising. This explains why she was impractical, unworldly, unsuspecting ("too giddy to mistrust a false friend") and lacking in solidity. Predominantly, she was "airy": and from this we may take it that she was more æsthetic and more intellectual than the world has supposed. Her concert parties show that she appreciated music: and although she had little or no education, her friendship with Dryden, since it was not amorous, may well have been based upon a larger measure of intellectual interest than anyone has supposed her to possess.

The three planets in water-signs (they are the trine-making trio) show that, as we should expect, she was mostly emotional and imaginative. We see them at work in her letter to Laurence Hyde (p. 189), and still more clearly in the letter to Mrs. Jennings (p. 212).

The horoscope is that of a fortunate, lovable and peculiar person. It is also emphatically feminine. Nell Gwyn would not have cared whether she had a vote or not. She knew men imaginatively. She liked them ("I am sorry to lose the men"); she knew that she could get her way with them; and she was not a woman who regarded men as her enemies, because she had nothing to fear from them.

NOTES

By V. E. Robson

(1) Was she really "too giddy" to mistrust a false friend? Or was it the intense loyalty shown by Aquarius, together with Jupiter, ruler of the Eleventh House, in Scorpio, trine Moon in Cancer? I should suggest that she was too loyal and sentimental where friends were concerned and turned a blind eye to their failings.

(2) All this paragraph points to Fixed Signs, and in a very particular way to Cancer. Cancer appears to accept its position and to work with the materials lying around. Dump it down somewhere and there it makes its home, just as a crab does.

I think the "grand trine" of Moon, Mars and Jupiter is important. As you know, trines are excellent for success, but they are very bad for energy and initiative. A grand trine in watery signs certainly makes for indolence and inclines to love of ease and luxury. Being a trine it brought ease without much effort, but it must have robbed her of backbone to some extent. A grand trine has been called very evil in effect, but this is extreme. I think it is rather like a closed electrical circuit, or a toy train that goes round and round without getting anywhere unless picked up bodily by some outside influence.

(3) Unquestionably so. The maternal instinct crops up in other ways also, e.g. Venus, ruler of the Fourth, the nearest planet to the Ascendant; Saturn, the ruler of the horoscope, in the Fifth (children); Mercury, ruler of the Fifth, conjunction Sun; also Leo (fifth sign) in the Seventh—in fact, the whole "maternal trinity" (Cancer, Leo and Virgo) influence this house.

APPENDICES

I

EPILOGUE

It is never satisfactory to leave half the *dramatis personæ* suspended in mid-air, and the reader may like to learn in brief what happened after Nell's death to some of the persons who had figured prominently in her life.

(I) THE DUKE OF ST. ALBANS

her elder son, was a lad of seventeen when Nell died. In the same year he became a colonel in the Eighth Regiment of Horse; and soon afterwards he took service under the Emperor Leopold the First and acquitted himself with credit when, in 1688, the Austrians besieged Belgrade and captured it from the Turks.

When he was twenty-three he fought at the Battle of Leyden and William the Third made him Captain of the Band of Gentlemen Pensioners. A few months later he married a great beauty of the time—Diana, daughter of Aubrey de Vere, the last Earl of Oxford. He took the side of the Whigs and in consequence remained out of favour during the reign of Queen Anne, but when George the First became our King he made Charles Beauclerk (as his father had named him) Lord Lieutenant of Berkshire and a Knight of the Garter. The Duke died at Bath in 1726, and was buried in Westminster Abbey.

His son, the second Duke, died in 1751; and the third Duke, having squandered much of the family fortune, died at Brussels in 1786. The third Duke had no children; and from this date, therefore, the hereditary influence of Nell Gwyn disappeared from the world.

(II) LOUISE DE QUÉROUILLE

Nell teased Louise about the latter's insistence upon her aristocratic lineage, but she had a right to be proud of it.

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The name K  roualle was derived from an ancestress of the earlier part of the fourteenth century. It was, however, too outlandish for the Englishman of the seventeenth century, and he used to refer to her as Madam Carwell.

Soon after Charles's death she retired, judiciously, to France, and although she paid a short visit to England during the reign of James the Second, she never returned here again. After the revolution of 1688, which put so inglorious an end to dismal Jimmy's reign, Louise found that her English and Irish revenues had been stopped. For the most part she spent the rest of her life at Aubigny where, having been harassed by debts which the French King finally alleviated, she died at the age of about eighty-five on November the 14th, 1734—the forty-seventh anniversary of Nell Gwyn's death.

(III) HORTENSE MANCINI

The after-history of Hortense is, as it ought to be, more striking. It is even, in fact, macabre. She drank too much, and she gambled too much. The death of James the Second affected her less violently than it affected Louise: for although she lost her house in the precincts of St. James's Palace, the new Government did not stop her pension. She withdrew to "a good-sized house" in Kensington Square: but, unfortunately for her mental comfort, King William decided soon afterwards to make Kensington Palace his headquarters, and no sooner had he done so than a flock of Anglican bishops installed themselves in the Square.

She died in 1699 at Chelsea, "probably at a small house in Paradise Row" (now demolished). At her death she was heavily in debt, and her creditors were on the point of seizing her body—presumably for the sake of any jewels which she had been wearing on her death-bed. They were prevented by her husband, who, eccentric to the last and fantastically devoted, took possession of her coffin and remains, and carried them about with him wherever he went.

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(IV) THE QUEEN

Although it is clear that Charles treated her with courtesy, Catherine of Braganza must have found her lot pleasanter after his death than during his lifetime. When he died, she was forty-seven years old; and soon after his death she lived at Somerset House and at Hammersmith. She chose the latter place, remote from London in her day, because she had founded there a Roman Catholic convent.

When William and Mary obtained the throne, Catherine remained upon friendly terms with them: partly perhaps because her native interest in Portugal had always been stronger than any interest which she may have taken in the affairs of England. In 1691 she was living at Euston, but in the following year she left England, taking a retinue of a hundred persons, and settled in a palace at Lisbon. In 1704, when she was sixty-six, she became Regent of Portugal: and she died on the last day of 1705—having outlived Charles for twenty years.

(V) BARBARA VILLIERS

A year after Charles's death, her Grace the Duchess of Cleveland, then in her forty-sixth year, contrived to bear a son. The child's father had been an actor of small importance. Rochester may well have been thinking of her when he wrote:

How lost soe'er, she'll find one Lover more,
A more abandoned Fool, than she a whore.

Still pursuing her libidinous course she married a rascal named Feilding when she was sixty, but was disconcerted to find that he had another wife living at the time. How long her excitement over the opposite sex continued we do not know, for she now retired to Walpole House in Chiswick Mall, where she died, unlamented, at the age of sixty-four. Young actors cannot often have made the considerable journey from Drury Lane to Chiswick. "She is buried," says the undefeatable Dasent, "in Chiswick Church, without a monument."

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(VI) LAURENCE HYDE

The man to whom Nell had written so charming a letter lived for twenty-four years after her death. Subsequently, he was appointed to the post of Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, but at that time he did not go to Dublin. James the Second, coming to the throne, at once made Hyde (or Lord Rochester as he had then become) Lord Treasurer. However, they could not get on together by reason of their differing views upon the place of Roman Catholicism in English political life, and Hyde was dismissed.

After the revolution in 1688 he led the Tory party. For two years from the end of 1700 he did become Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, but he seems to have regarded church matters with more interest than political duties. He died in 1711, aged seventy.

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II

HER WILL

In the name of God, Amen. I, Ellen Gwynne, of the parish of St. Martin-in-the-fields, and county of Middlesex, spinster, this 9th day of July, anno Domini 1687, do make this my last will and testament, and do revoke all former wills. First, in hope of a joyful resurrection, I do recommend myself whence I came, my soul into the hands of Almighty God, and my body unto the earth, to be decently buried, at the discretion of my executors, herein-after named; and as for all such houses, lands, tenements, offices, places, pensions, annuities, and hereditaments whatsoever, in England, Ireland, or elsewhere, wherein I, or my heirs, or any to the use of, or in trust for me or my heirs, hath, have, or may or ought to have, any estate, right, claim, or demand whatsoever, of fee-simple or freehold, I give and devise the same all and wholly to my dear natural son, his Grace the Duke of St. Albans, and to the heirs of his body; and as for all and all manner of my jewels, plate, household stuff, goods, chattels, credits, and other estate whatsoever, I give and bequeath the same, and every part and parcel thereof, to my executors hereafter named, in, upon, and by way of trust for my said dear son, his executors, administrators, and assigns, and to and for his and their own sole use and peculiar benefit and advantage, in such manner as is hereafter expressed; and I do hereby constitute the Right Hon. Lawrence, Earl of Rochester, the Right Hon. Thomas, Earl of Pembroke, the Hon. Sir Robert Sawyer, Knight, his Majesty's Attorney-General, and the Hon. Henry Sidney, Esq., to be my executors of this my last will and testament, desiring them to please to accept and undertake the execution thereof in trust as afore-mentioned; and I do give and bequeath to the several persons in the schedule hereunto annexed the several legacies and sums of money therein expressed or mentioned; and my further will and mind, and anything above notwithstanding, is, that if my said dear son

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happen to depart this natural life without issue then living, or such issue die without issue, then and in such case, all and all manner of my estate above devised to him, and in case my said natural son die before the age of one-and-twenty years, then also all my personal estate devised to my said executors not before then by my said dear son and his issue, and my said executors, and the executors or administrators of the survivor of them, or by some of them otherwise lawfully and firmly devised or disposed of, shall remain, go, or be to my said executors, their heirs, executors, and administrators respectively, in trust of and for answering, paying, and satisfying all and every and all manners of my gifts, legacies, and directions that at any time hereafter, during my life, shall be by me anywise mentioned or given in or by any codicils or schedule to be hereto annexed. And lastly, that my said executors shall have, all and every of them, £100 a-piece, of lawful money, in consideration of their care and trouble herein, and furthermore, all their several and respective expenses and charges in and about the execution of this my will. It witness of all which, I hereunto set my hand and seal, the day and year first above written.

E. G.

Signed, sealed, published, and declared, in the presence of us, who at the same time subscribe our names, also in her presence.

LUCY HAMILTON SANDYS,
EDWARD WYBORNE,
JOHN WARNER,
WILLIAM SCARBOROUGH,
JAMES BOOTH.

FIRST CODICIL

The last request of Mrs. Ellenr. Gwynn to his Grace the Duke of St. Albans, made October the 18th, 1687.

1. I desire I may be buried in the church of St. Martin's-in-the-fields.
2. That Dr. Tenison may preach my funeral sermon.
3. That there may be a decent pulpit-cloth and cushion given to St. Martin's-in-the-fields.

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4. That he [the Duke] would give one hundred pounds for the use of the poor of the said St. Martin's and St. James's, Westminster, to be given into the hands of the said Dr. Tenison, to be disposed of at his discretion, for taking any poor debtors of the said parish out of prison, and for cloaths this winter, and other necessities, as he shall find most fit.
5. That for showing my charity to those who differ from me in religion, I desire that fifty pounds may be put into the hands of Dr. Tenison and Mr. Warner, who, taking to them any two persons of the Roman Religion, may dispose of it for the use of the poor of that religion inhabiting the parish of St. James's aforesaid.
6. That Mrs. Rose Forster may have two hundred pounds given to her, any time within a year after my decease.
7. That Jo., my porter, may have ten pounds given him.

My request to his Grace is, further—

8. That my present nurses may have ten pounds each, and mourning, besides their wages due to them.
9. That my present servants may have mourning each, and a year's wages, besides their wages due.
10. That the Lady Fairborne may have fifty pounds given to her to buy a ring.
11. That my kinsman, Mr. Cholmley, may have one hundred pounds given to him, within a year after this date.
12. That His Grace would please to lay out twenty pounds yearly for the releasing of poor debtors out of prison every Christmas-day.
13. That Mr. John Warner may have fifty pounds given him to buy a ring.
14. That the Lady Hollyman may have the pension of ten shillings per week continued to her during the said lady's life.

The following (second) codicil was proved separately on December 7, 1688, and is registered in the Prerogative Court of Canterbury, 162, Exton:

The second codicil of Mrs. Ellen Gwinn deceased publicly declared by her before divers creditable witnesses after the making of her last Will and Testament and former Codicil according as it was pronounced in and by the sentence given by the Right Worshipful Sir Richard Raines, Knight, Doctor

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of Laws, and Master Keeper of Commissary of the Prerogative Court of Canterbury the nineteenth day of July One Thousand Six Hundred and Eighty Eight in a Cause lately depending before him concerning the proof thereof followeth, viz:

The said Mrs. Ellen Gwinne did give and bequeath to Mrs. Rose Forster, her sister, the sum of two hundred pounds over and above the sum of two hundred pounds, which she gave to her the said Rose in her former Codicil.

To Mr. Forster, husband of the said Rose Forster, a ring of the value of forty pounds or forty pounds to buy him a ring.

To Dr. Harrell, twenty pounds.

To Mr. Derrick, nephew of the said Dr. Harrell, ten pounds.

To Dr. le Febure twenty pounds respectively to buy them rings.

To Bridget Long, who had been her servant for divers years, the sum of twenty pounds of lawful money of England yearly during her natural life.

To Mrs. Edling a new gown.

And Mr. John Warner, her Chaplain, was present with others at the declaring thereof, and that a little before the declaring of the same she being of perfect mind and memory did order or desire the said Mr. Warner to put into writing what she should then declare. And that the said legacies were wrote and read to the deceased and by her approved as part of her last Will and Testament as by the proofs made and sentence given in the said Cause do appear.*

* Quoted from Gordon Goodwin's edition of Peter Cunningham's *The Story of Nell Gwyn*.

III

THE DRURY LANE PATENT

“Charles the Second by the grace of God King of England, Scotland, France and Ireland, Defender of the Faith, etc.

“To all to whom these presents shall come greeting know that we of our especial grace certain knowledge and mere motion and upon the humble petition of our trusty and well beloved Thomas Killigrew, Esquire, one of the grooms of our bed chamber have given and granted and by these presents for us our heirs and successors do give and grant unto the said Thomas Killigrew his heirs and assigns full power license and authority that they and every of them by him and themselves and by all and every such person or persons as he or they shall depute or appoint and his or their labourers servants and workmen shall and may lawfully quietly and peaceably frame erect new-build and set up in any place within our cities of London and Westminster or the suburbs thereof where he or they shall find best accommodation for that purpose to be assigned and allotted out by the Surveyor of our Works one theatre or playhouse with necessary tiring and retiring rooms and other places convenient of such extent and dimensions as the said Thomas Killigrew his heirs or assigns shall think fitting wherein tragedies comedies plays operas music scenes and all other entertainments of the stage whatsoever may be shown and presented. And we do hereby for us our heirs and successors grant unto the said Thomas Killigrew his heirs and assigns full power licence and authority from time to time to gather together entertain govern privilege and keep such and so many players and persons to exercise and act tragedies comedies plays operas and other performances of the stage within the House to be built as aforesaid or within any other House where he or they can be best fitted for that purpose within our cities of London and Westminster or the suburbs

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thereof which said Company shall be the servants of us and our dear Consort and shall consist of such number as the said Thomas Killigrew his heirs or assigns shall from time to time think meet. And such persons to permit and continue at and during the pleasure of the said Thomas Killigrew his heirs and assigns from time to time to act plays and entertainments of the stage of all sorts peaceably and quietly without the impeachment or impediment of any person or persons whatsoever for the honest recreation of such as shall desire to see the same. And that it shall and may be lawful to and for the said Thomas Killigrew his heirs and assigns to take and receive of such our subjects as shall resort to see or hear any such plays scenes and entertainments whatsoever such sum or sums of money as either have accustomedly been given or taken in the like kind or as shall be thought reasonable by him or them in regard of the great expenses of scenes music and new decorations as have not been formerly used. And further for us our heirs and successors we do hereby give and grant unto the said Thomas Killigrew his heirs and assigns full power to make such allowances out of that which he shall so receive by the acting of plays and entertainments of the stage as aforesaid to the actors and other persons employed in acting representing or in any quality whatsoever about the said theatre as he or they shall think fit and that the said Company shall be under the sole government and authority of the said Thomas Killigrew his heirs and assigns and all scandalous and mutinous persons from time to time by him and them to be ejected and disabled from playing in the said theatre. And for that we are informed that divers Companies of players have taken upon them to act plays publicly in our said cities of London and Westminster or the suburbs thereof without any authority for that purpose we do hereby declare our dislike of the same and will and grant that only the said Company to be erected and set up by the said Thomas Killigrew his heirs and assigns by virtue of these presents and one other Company to be erected and set up by Sir William Davenant Knight his heirs and assigns and none other shall from henceforth act or present comedies tragedies plays or entertainments of

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the stage within our said cities of London and Westminster and the suburbs thereof which said Company to be erected by the said Sir William Davenant his heirs or assigns shall be subject to his or their government and authority and shall be styled the Duke of York's Company. And the better to preserve amity and correspondence betwixt the said Companies and that the one may not inroach upon the other by any indirect means we will and ordain that no actor or other person employed about either of the said theatres erected by the said Thomas Killigrew and Sir William Davenant or either of them or deserting his Company shall be received by the governor of the said other Company to be employed in acting or in any matter relating to the Stage without the consent and approbation of the governor of the Company whereof the said person so ejected or deserting was a member signified under his hand and seal. And we do by these presents declare all other Company and Companies before mentioned to be silenced and suppressed.

"And forasmuch as many plays formerly acted do contain several profane obscene and scurrilous passages and the womens parts therein have been acted by men in the habit of women at which some have taken offence for the preventing of these abuses for the future we do hereby strictly command and enjoin that from henceforth no new play shall be acted by either of the said Companies containing any passage offensive to piety and good manners nor any old or revived play containing any such offensive passage as aforesaid until the same shall be corrected and purged by the said masters or governors of the said respective companies from all such offensive and scandalous passages as aforesaid.

"And we do likewise permit and give leave that all the womens parts to be acted in either of the said two Companies for the time to come may be performed by women so long as these recreations which by reason of the abuses aforesaid were scandalous and offensive may by such reformation be esteemed not only harmless delights but useful and instructive representations of human life to such of our good subjects as shall resort to the same. And

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these our letters patent or the inrolment thereof shall be in all things firm good and effectual in the law according to the true intent and meaning of the same. Anything in these presents contained or any law statute act ordinance proclamation provision or restriction or any other matter cause or thing whatsoever to the contrary in anywise notwithstanding although express mention etc. In witness etc.

“Witness the King at Westminster the five and twentieth day of April (1662).

“PER IPSUM REGEM.”*

* Quoted from *Nell Gwynne*, by Arthur Irwin Dasent.

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